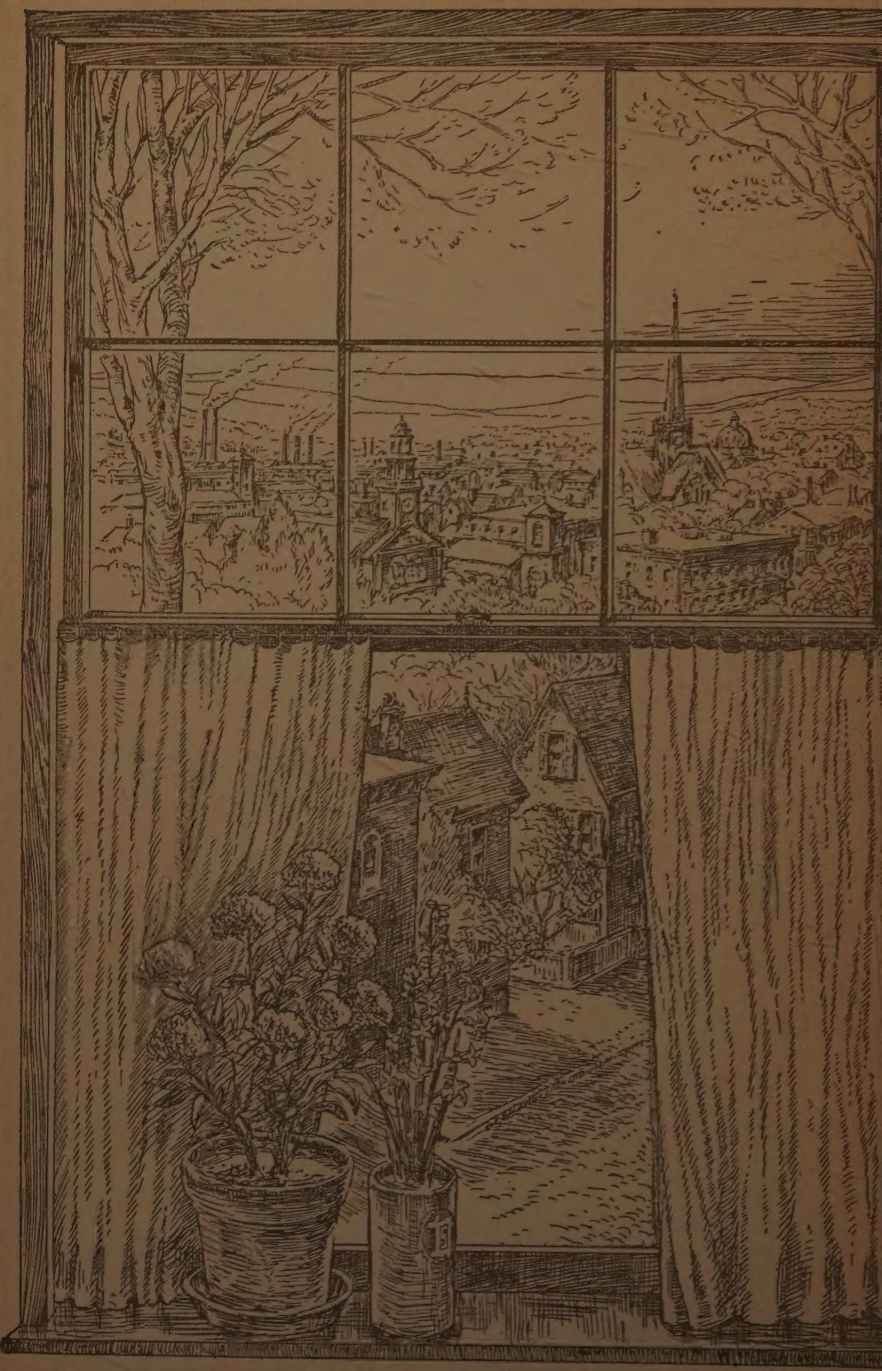
THE ROAD TO UNDERSTANDING

ELEANOR H. PORTER



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THE ROAD TO UNDERSTANDING

AT SIGHT OF HER THE DOCTOR LEAPED FORWARD WITH A LOW CRY (p. 174)

THE ROAD TO UNDERSTANDING

BY

ELEANOR H. PORTER

Author of "Just David"

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TO
MY FRIEND
Miss Grace Wheeler

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THE ROAD TO UNDERSTANDING

CHAPTER I

FROSTED CAKES AND SHOTGUNS

If Burke Denby had not been given all the frosted cakes and toy shotguns he wanted at the age of ten, it might not have been so difficult to convince him at the age of twenty that he did not want to marry Helen Barnet.

Mabel, the beautiful and adored wife of John Denby, had died when Burke was four years old; and since that time, life, for Burke, had been victory unseasoned with defeat. A succession of "anything-for-peace" rulers of the nursery, and a father who could not bring himself to be the cause of the slightest shadow on the face of one who was the breathing image of his lost wife, had all contributed to these victories.

Nor had even school-days brought the usual wholesome discipline and democratic leveling; for a pocketful of money and a naturally generous disposition made a combination not to be lightly overlooked by boys and girls ever alert for "fun"; and an influential father and the scarcity of desirable positions

made another combination not to be lightly overlooked by impecunious teachers anxious to hold their "jobs." It was easy to ignore minor faults, especially as the lad had really a brilliant mind, and (when not crossed) a most amiable disposition.

Between the boy and his father all during the years of childhood and youth, the relationship was very beautiful — so beautiful that the entire town saw it and expressed its approval: in public by nods and admiring adjectives; in private by frequent admonitions to wayward sons and thoughtless fathers to follow the pattern so gloriously set for them.

Of all this John Denby saw nothing; nor would he have given it a thought if he had seen it. John Denby gave little thought to anything, after his wife died, except to business and his boy, Burke. Business, under his skillful management and carefully selected assistants, soon almost ran itself. There was left then only the boy, Burke.

From the first they were comrades, even when comradeship meant the poring over a Mother Goose story-book, or mastering the intricacies of a game of tiddledywinks. Later, together, they explored the world of music, literature, science, and art, spending the long summer playtimes, still together, traveling in both well-known and little-known lands.

Toward everything fine and beautiful and luxurious the boy turned as a flower turns toward the light, which pleased the man greatly. And as the boy had but to express a wish to have it instantly find an

echo in his father's heart, it is not strange, perhaps, that John Denby did not realize that, notwithstanding all his "training," self-control and self-sacrifice were unknown words to his son.

One word always, however, was held before the boy from the very first — mother; yet it was not as a word, either, but as a living presence. Always he was taught that she was with them, a bright, beauteous, gracious being, loving, tender, perfect. Whatever they saw was seen through her eyes. Whatever they did was done as with her. Stories of her beauty, charm, and goodness filled many an hour of intimate talk. She was the one flawless woman born into the world — so said Burke's father to his son.

Burke was nearly twenty-one, and half through college, when he saw Helen Barnet. She was sitting in the big west window in the library, with the afternoon sun turning her wonderful hair to gold. In her arms she held a sleeping two-year-old boy. With the marvelous light on her face, and the crimson velvet draperies behind her, she looked not unlike a pictured Madonna. It was not, indeed, until a very lifelike red swept to the roots of the girl's hair that the young man, staring at her from the doorway, realized that she was not, in truth, a masterpiece on an old-time wall, but a very much alive, very much embarrassed young woman in his father's library.

With a blush that rivaled hers, and an incoherent apology, he backed hastily from the room. He went then in search of his father. He had returned from

college an hour before to find his father's youngest sister, Eunice, and her family, guests in the house. But this stranger — this bewilderingly beautiful girl —

In the upper hall he came face to face with his father.

"Dad, who in Heaven's name is she?" he demanded without preamble.

"*She?*"

"That exquisitely beautiful girl in the library. Who is she?"

"In the library? Girl? Nonsense! You're dreaming, Burke. There's no one here but your aunt."

"But I just came from there. I saw her. She held a child in her arms."

"Ho!" John Denby gave a gesture as if tossing a trivial something aside. "You're dreaming again, Burke. The nursemaid, probably. Your aunt brought one with her. But, see here, son. I was looking for you. Come into my room. I wanted to know —" And he plunged into a subject far removed from nursemaids and their charges.

Burke, however, was not to be so lightly diverted. True, he remained for ten minutes at his father's side, and he listened dutifully to what his father said; but the day was not an hour older before he had sought and found the girl he had seen in the library.

She was not in the library now. She was on the wide veranda, swinging the cherubic boy in the hammock. To Burke she looked even more bewitching than she had before. As a pictured saint, hung about

with the aloofness of the intangible and the unreal, she had been beautiful and alluring enough; but now, as a breathing, moving creature treading his own familiar veranda and touching with her white hands his own common hammock, she was bewilderingly enthralling.

Combating again an almost overwhelming desire to stand in awed worship, he advanced hastily, speaking with a diffidence and an incoherence utterly foreign to his usual blithe boyishness.

"Oh, I hope — I did n't, did I? *Did* I wake — the baby up?"

With a start the girl turned, her blue eyes wide.

"*You?* Oh, in the library —"

"Yes; an hour ago. I do hope I did n't — wake him up!"

Before the ardent admiration in the young man's eyes, the girl's fell.

"Oh, no, sir. He just — woke himself."

"Oh, I 'm so glad! And — and I want you to forgive me for — for staring at you so rudely. You see, I was so surprised to — to see you there like — like a picture, and — You will forgive me — er — I don't know your name."

"Barnet — Helen Barnet." She blushed prettily; then she laughed, throwing him a mischievous glance. "Oh, yes, I 'll forgive you; but — I don't know your name, either."

"Thank you. I knew you 'd — understand. I 'm Denby — Burke Denby."

"Mr. Denby's son?"

"Yes."

"Oh-h!"

At the admiration in her eyes and voice he unconsciously straightened himself.

"And do you live — here?" breathed the girl.

To hide the inexplicable emotion that seemed suddenly to be swelling within him, the young man laughed lightly.

"Of course — when I'm not away!" His eyes challenged her, and she met the sally with a gurgle of laughter.

"Oh, I meant — when you're not away," she bridled.

He watched the wild-rose color sweep to her temples — and stepped nearer.

"But you have n't told me a thing of yourself — yet," he complained.

She sighed — and at the sigh an unreasoning wrath against an unknown something rose within him.

"There's nothing to tell," she murmured. "I'm just here — a nurse to Master Paul and his brother." She sighed again; and, at this second sigh, Burke Denby's wrath became reasoning and definite. It was directed against the world in general, and his aunt in particular, that they should permit for one instant this glorious creature to sacrifice her charm and sweetness on the altar of menial services to a couple of unappreciative infants.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" he breathed, plainly aglow

HE WAS LOOKING AT HER LOVELY, GLORIFIED FACE

at the intimate nearness of this heart-to-heart talk. "But I'm glad — you're *here!*"

Once more, before he turned reluctantly away, he gazed straight into her blue eyes — and the game was on.

It was a pretty game. The young man was hard hit, and it was his first wound from Cupid's dart. Heretofore in his curriculum girls had not been included; and the closeness of his association with his father had not been conducive to incipient love affairs. Perhaps, for these reasons, he was all the more ardent a wooer. Certainly an ardent wooer he was. There was no gainsaying that — though the boy himself, at first, did not recognize it as wooing at all.

It began with pity.

He was so sorry for her — doomed to slave all day for those two rascally small boys. He could not keep her out of his mind. As he tramped the hills the next morning the very blue of the sky and the softness of the air against his cheek became a pain to him — *she* was tied to a stuffy nursery. His own freedom of will and movement became a source of actual vexation — *she* was bound to a "do this" and a "do that" all day. He wondered then, suddenly, if he could not in some way help. He sought her as soon as possible.

"Come, I want you to go to walk with me. I want to show you the view from Pike's Hill," he urged.

"Me? To walk? Why, Mr. Denby, I can't!"

Again the wild-rose flush came and went — and again Burke Denby stepped nearer.

"Why not?"

"Why, I could n't leave the children; besides — it's Master Paul's nap hour."

"What a pity — when it's so beautiful out! To-morrow, then, in the morning?"

She shook her head.

"I could n't, Mr. Denby."

"The afternoon, then?"

"No."

"Is it because you don't *want* to?"

"*Want to!*"

At the look of longing that leaped to her face, the thwarted youth felt again the fierce wrath he had known the first day of their meeting.

"Then, by Jove, you shall!" he vowed. "Don't they ever give you any time to yourself?"

She dimpled into shy laughter.

"I shall have a few hours Thursday — after three."

"Good! I'll remember. We'll go then."

And they went.

To Burke Denby it was a wonderful and a brand-new experience. Never had the sky been so blue, the air so soft, the woods so enchantingly beautiful. And he was so glad that they were thus — for her. She was enjoying it so much, and he was so glad that he could give this happiness to her! Enthusiastically he pointed out here a bird and there a flower; carefully he helped her over every stick and stone; determinedly he set himself to making her forget her dreary daily tasks. And when she lifted her wonder-

ing eyes to his face, or placed her half-reluctant fingers in his extended hand, how he thrilled and tingled through his whole being — he had not supposed that unselfish service to a fellow-being could bring to one such a warm sense of gratification.

At the top of the hill they sat down to rest, before them the wonderful panorama of grandeur — the green valley, the silvery river, the far-reaching mauve and purple mountains.

"My, is n't this real pretty!" exclaimed the girl.

The young man scarcely heard the words, else he would have frowned unconsciously at the "real pretty." He was looking at her lovely, glorified face.

"I thought you'd like it," he breathed.

"Oh, I do."

"I know another just as fine. We'll go there next."

A shadow like a cloud crossed her face.

"But I have so little time!"

The cloud leaped to his face now and became thunderous.

"Shucks! I forgot. What a nuisance! Oh, I say, you know, I don't think you ought to be doing — such work. Do you — forgive me, but do you really — have to?"

"Yes, I have to."

She had turned her face half away, but he thought he could see tears in her eyes.

"Are you — all alone, then? Have n't you any — people?" His voice had grown very tender.

"No — no one. Father died, then mother. There was no one else — to care; and no — money."

"Oh, I'm so — so sorry!"

He spoke awkwardly, with obvious restraint. He wanted suddenly to take her in his arms — to soothe and comfort her as one would a child. But she was not a child, and it would not do, of course. But she looked so forlorn, so appealing, so sweet, so absolutely dear —

He got abruptly to his feet.

"Come, come, this will never do!" he exclaimed blithely. "Here I am — making you talk of your work and your troubles, when I took you up here with the express intention of making you forget them. Suppose we go through this little path here. There's a dandy spring of cold water farther on. And — and forgive me, please. I won't make you — talk any more."

And he would not, indeed, he vowed to himself. She was no child. She was a young woman grown, and a very beautiful one, at that. He could not console her with a kiss and a caress, and a bonbon, of course. But he could give her a bit of playtime, now and then — and he would, too. He would see to it that, for the rest of her stay under his father's roof, she should not want for the companionship of some one who — who "cared." He would be her kind and thoughtful good friend. Indeed, he would!

Burke Denby began the very next morning to be a friend to Miss Barnet. Accepting as irrevocable

the fact that she could not be separated from her work, he made no plans that did not include Masters Paul and Percy Allen.

"I'm going to take your sons for a drive this morning, if you don't mind," he said briskly to his aunt at the breakfast table.

"Mind? Of course I don't, you dear boy," answered the pleased mother, fondly. "*You're* the one that will mind — as you'll discover, I fear, when you find yourself with a couple of mischievous small boys on your hands!"

"I'm not worrying," laughed the youth. "I shall take Miss Barnet along, too."

"Oh — Helen? That's all right, then. You'll do nicely with her," smiled Mrs. Allen, as she rose from the table. "If you'll excuse me, I'll go and see that the boys are made ready for their treat."

Burke Denby took the boys for a drive almost every day after that. He discovered that Miss Barnet greatly enjoyed driving. There were picnics, too, in the cool green of the woods, on two or three fine days. Miss Barnet also liked picnics. Still pursuant of his plan to give the forlorn little nursemaid "one good time in her life," Burke Denby contrived to be with her not a little in between drives and picnics. Ostensibly he was putting up swings, building toy houses, playing ball with Masters Paul and Percy Allen; but in reality he was trying to put a little "interest" into Miss Helen Barnet's daily task. He was so sorry for her! It was such a shame that so

gloriously beautiful a girl should be doomed to a slavery like that! He was so glad that for a time he might bring some brightness into her life!

"And do you see how perfectly devoted Burke is to Paul and Percy?" cried Mrs. Allen, one day, to her brother. "I had no idea the dear boy was so fond of children!"

"Hm-m. Is he really, indeed," murmured John Denby. "No, I had not noticed."

John Denby spoke vaguely, yet with a shade of irritation. Fond as he was of his sister and of his small nephews, he was finding it difficult to accustom himself to the revolutionary changes in his daily routine that their presence made necessary. He was learning to absent himself more and more from the house.

For a week, therefore, unchallenged, and cheerfully intent on his benevolent mission, Burke Denby continued his drives and picnics and ball-playing with Masters Paul and Percy Allen; then, very suddenly, four little words from the lips of Helen Barnet changed for him the earth and the sky above.

"When I go away —" she began.

"When you — *go* — *away!*" he interrupted.

"Yes. Why, Mr. Denby, what makes you look so — queer?"

"Nothing. I was thinking — that is, I had forgotten — I —" He rose to his feet abruptly, and crossed the room. At the window, for a full minute, he stood motionless, looking out at the falling rain. When he turned back into the room there was a new

expression on his face. With a quick glance at the children playing on the rug before the fireplace, he crossed straight to the plainly surprised young woman and dropped himself in a chair at her side.

"Helen Barnet, will you — marry me?" he asked softly.

"*Mr. Denby!*"

With a boyish laugh Burke Denby drew his chair nearer. His face was alight with the confident happiness of one who has never known rebuff.

"You are surprised — and so was I, a minute ago. You see, it came to me all in a flash — what it would be to live — without you." His voice grew tender. "Helen, you will stay, and be my wife?"

"Oh, no, no — I must n't, I can't! Why, of course I can't, Mr. Denby," fluttered the girl, in a panic of startled embarrassment. "I'm sure you — you don't want me to."

"But I do. Listen!" He threw another quick glance at the absorbed children as he reached out and took possession of her hand. "It all came to me, back there at the window — the dreariness, the emptiness of — everything, without *you*. And I saw then what you've been to me every day this past week. How I've watched for you and waited for you, and how everything I did and said and had was just — something for you. And I knew then that I — I loved you. You see, I — I never loved any one before," — the boyish red swept to his forehead as he laughed whimsically, — "and so I — I did n't recognize the

symptoms!" With the lightness of his words he was plainly trying to hide the shake in his voice. "Helen, you — will?"

"Oh, but I—I—!" Her eyes were frightened and pleading.

"Don't you *care* at all?"

She turned her head away.

"If you don't, then won't you let me *make* you care?" he begged. "You said you had no one now to care — at all; and I care so much! Won't you let — "

Somewhere a door shut.

With a low cry Helen Barnet pulled away her hand and sprang to her feet. She was down on the rug with the children, very flushed of face, when Mrs. Allen appeared in the library doorway.

"Oh, here you are!" Mrs. Allen frowned and spoke a bit impatiently. "I've been hunting everywhere for you. I supposed you were in the nursery. Won't you put the boys into fresh suits? I have friends calling soon, and I want the children brought to the drawing-room when I ring, and left till I call you again."

"Yes, ma'am."

With a still more painful flush on her face Helen Barnet swept the blocks into her apron, rose to her feet, and hurried the children from the room. She did not once glance at the young man standing by the window.

Mrs. Allen tossed her nephew a smile and a shrug which might have been translated into "You see

what we have to endure — so tiresome!" as she, too, disappeared.

Burke Denby did not smile. He did frown, however. He felt vaguely irritated and abused. He wished his aunt would not be so "bossy" and disagreeable. He wished Helen would not act so cringingly submissive. As if she — But then, it would be different right away, of course, as soon as he had made known the fact that she was to be his wife. Everything would be different. For that matter, Helen herself would be different. Not only would she hold her head erect and take her proper place, but she would not — well, there were various little ways and expressions which she would drop, of course. And how beautiful she was! How sweet! How dear! And how she had suffered in her loneliness! How he would love to make for her a future all gloriously happy and tender with his strong, encircling arms!

It was a pleasant picture. Burke Denby's heart quite swelled within him as he turned to leave the room.

Upstairs, the girl, the cause of it all, hurried with palpitating nervousness through the task of clothing two active little bodies in fresh garments. That her thoughts were not with her fingers was evident; but not until the summoning bell from the drawing-room gave her a few minutes' respite from duty did she have an opportunity really to think. Even then she could not think lucidly or connectedly. Always

before her eyes was Burke Denby's face, ardent, pleading, confident. And he expected — Before she saw him again she must be ready, she knew, with her answer. But how *could* she answer?

Helen Barnet was lonely, heartsick, and frightened — a combination that could hardly aid in the making of a wise, unprejudiced decision, especially when one was very much in love. And Helen Barnet knew that she was that.

Less than two years before, Helen Barnet had been the petted daughter of a village storekeeper in a small Vermont town. Then, like the proverbial thunderbolt, had come death and financial disaster, throwing her on her own resources. And not until she had attempted to utilize those resources for her support, had she found how frail they were.

Though the Barnets had not been wealthy, the village store had been profitable; and Helen (the only child) had been almost as greatly overindulged as was Burke Denby himself. Being a very pretty girl, she had become the village belle before she donned long dresses. Having been shielded from work and responsibility, and always carefully guarded from everything unpleasant, she was poorly equipped for a struggle of any sort, even aside from the fact that there was, apparently, nothing that she could do well enough to be paid for doing it. In the past twenty months she had obtained six positions — and had abandoned five of them: two because of incompetency, two because of lack of

necessary strength, one because her beauty was plainly making the situation intolerable. For three months now she had been nurse to Masters Paul and Percy Allen. She liked Mrs. Allen, and she liked the children. But the care, the confinement, the never-ending task of dancing attendance upon the whims and tempers of two active little boys, was proving to be not a little irksome to young blood unused to the restraints of self-sacrifice. Then, suddenly, there had come the visit to the Denby homestead, and the advent into her life of Burke Denby; and now here, quite within her reach, if she could believe her eyes and ears, was this dazzling, unbelievable thing — Burke Denby's love.

Helen Barnet knew all about love. Had she not lisped its praises in odes to the moon in her high-school days? It had to do with flowers and music and angels. On the old porch back home — what was it that long-haired boy used to read to her? Oh, Tennyson. That was it.

And now it had come to *her* — love. Not that it was exactly unexpected: she had been waiting for her lover since she had put up her hair, of course. But to have him come like this— and such a lover! So rich — and he was such a grand, handsome young man, too! And she loved him. She loved him dearly. If only she dared say "yes"! No more poverty, no more loneliness, no more slaving at the beck and call of some hated employer. Oh, if she only dared!

For one delirious moment Helen Barnet almost

thought she did — dare. Then, bitterly, the thought of his position — and hers — rolled in upon her. Whatever else the last two wretched years had done for her, it had left her no illusions. She had no doubts as to her reception, as Burke Denby's wife, at the hands of Burke Denby's friends and relatives. And again, whatever the last two years had done for her, they had not robbed her of her pride. And the Barnets, away back in the little Vermont town, had been very proud. To Helen Barnet now, therefore, the picture of herself as Burke Denby's wife, flouted and frowned upon by Burke Denby's friends, was intolerable. Frightened and heartsick, she determined to beat a hasty retreat. It simply could not be. That was all. Very likely, anyway, Burke Denby had not been more than half in earnest himself.

The bell rang then again from the drawing-room, and Helen went down to get the children. In the hall she met Burke Denby; but she only shook her head in answer to his low "Helen, when may I see you?" and hurried by without a word, her face averted.

Three times again within the next twenty-four hours she pursued the same tactics, only to be brought up sharply at last against a peremptory "Helen, you shall let me talk to you a minute! Why do you persist in hiding behind those two rascally infants all the time, when you know that you have only to say the word, and you are as free as the air?"

"But I must — that is — I can't say the word, Mr. Denby. Truly I can't!"

His face fell a little.

"What do you mean? You can't mean — you *can't* mean — you won't — marry me?"

She threw a hurried look about her. He had drawn her into the curtained bay window of the upper hallway, as she was passing on to the nursery.

"Yes, I mean — that," she panted, trying to release her arm from his clasp.

"Helen! Do you mean you don't *care?*" he demanded passionately.

"Yes, yes — that's what I mean." She pulled again at her arm.

"Helen, look at me. You can't look me straight in the eye and say you don't — *care!*"

"Oh, yes, I can. I — I —" The telltale color flooded her face. With a choking little breath she turned her head quite away.

"You do — you do! And you shall marry me!" breathed the youth, his lips almost brushing the soft hair against her ear.

"No, no, Mr. Denby, I can't — I — *can't!*" With a supreme effort she wrenched herself free and fled down the hall.

If Helen Barnet thought this settled the matter, she ill-judged the nature of the man with whom she had to deal. Unlimited frosted cakes and shotguns had not taught Burke Denby to accept no for an answer — especially for an answer to something he had so set his heart upon as he had this winning of Helen Barnet for his wife.

Burke Denby did not know anything about love. He had never sung odes to the moon, or read Tennyson to pretty girls on secluded verandas. He had not been looking for love to meet him around the bend of the next street. Love had come now as an Event, capitalized. Love was Life, and Life was Heaven — if it might be passed with Helen Barnet at his side. Without her it would be — But Burke ignored the alternative. It was not worth considering, anyway, for of course she would be at his side.

She loved him; he was sure of that. This fancied obstacle in the way that loomed so large in her eyes, he did not fear in the least. He really rather liked it. It added zest and excitement, and would make his final triumph all the more heart-warming and satisfying. He had only to convince Helen, of course, and the mere convincing would not be without its joy and compensation.

It was with really pleasurable excitement, therefore, that Burke Denby laid his plans and carried them to the triumphant finish of a carefully arranged tête-à-tête in the library, when he knew that they would have at least half an hour to themselves.

"There, I've got you now, you little wild thing!" he cried, closing the library door, and standing determinedly with his back to it, as she made a frightened move to go, at finding herself alone with him.

"But, Mr. Denby, I can't. I really must go," she palpitated.

"No, you can't go. I've had altogether too much

trouble getting you here, and getting those blessed youngsters safely away with their mamma for a bit of a drive with my dad."

"Then you *planned* this?"

"I did." He was regarding her with half-quizzical, wholly fond eyes. "And I had you summoned to the library — but I was careful not to say who wanted you. Oh, Helen, Helen, how can you seek to avoid me like this, when you know how I love you!" There was only tenderness now in his voice and manner. He had taken both her hands in his.

"But you must n't love me."

"Not love — my wife?"

"I'm not your wife."

"You're going to be, dear."

"I can't. I told you I could n't, Mr. Denby."

"My name is 'Burke,' my love."

His voice was whimsically light again. Very plainly Mr. Burke Denby was not appreciating the seriousness of the occasion.

She flushed and bit her lip.

"I think it's real mean of you to — to make it so hard for me!" she half sobbed.

With sudden passion he caught her in his arms.

"Hard? *Hard?* Then if it's hard, it means you *do* love me. As if I'd give you up now! Helen, why do you torture me like this? Dearest, *when* will you marry me?"

She struggled feebly in his arms.

"I told you; never."

"Why not?"

No answer.

"Helen, why not?" He loosened his clasp and held her off at arms' length.

"Because."

"Because what?"

No answer again.

"You are n't — promised to any one else?" For the first time a shadow of uneasy doubt crossed his face.

She shook her head.

"Oh, no."

"Then what is it?"

Her eyes, frightened and pleading, searched his face. There was a tense moment of indecision. Then in a tragic burst it came.

"Maybe you think I'd — marry you, and be your wife, and have all your folks look down on me!"

"Look *down* on you?"

"Yes, because I'm not so swell and grand as they are. I'm only —"

With a quick cry he caught her to himself again, and laid a reproving finger on her lips.

"Hush! Don't you let me hear you say that again — those horrid words! You are you, *yourself*, the dearest, sweetest little woman that was ever made, and I love you, and I'm going to marry you. Look down on you, indeed! I'd like to see them try it!"

"But they will. I'm only a nurse-girl."

"Hush!" He almost shook her in his wrath. "I

tell you, you are *you* — and that's all I want to know. And that's all anybody will want to know. I'm not in love with your ancestors, or with your relatives, or your friends. I don't love you because you are, or are not, a nurse-girl, or a school-teacher, or a butterfly of fashion. I even don't love you because your eyes are blue, or because your wonderful hair is like the softest of spun gold. It's just because you are you, sweetheart; and you, *just you*, are the whole wide world to me!"

"But — your father?"

"He will love you because I love you. Dad is my good chum — he's always been that. What I love, he'll love. You'll see."

"Do you think he really will?" A dawning hope was coming into her eyes.

"I'm sure he will. Why, dad is the other half of myself. Always, all the way up, dad has been like that. And everything I've wanted, he's always let me have."

She drew a tremulous breath of surrender.

"Well, of course, if I thought you all *wanted* me —"

"*Want you!*" With his impulsive lips on hers she had her answer, and there Burke Denby found his.

CHAPTER II

AN ONLY SON

PROUD, and blissfully happy in his victory, Burke went to his father; and to his father (so far as the latter himself was concerned) he carried a bombshell.

For two reasons John Denby had failed to see what was taking place in his own home. First, because it would never have occurred to him that his son could fall in love with a nursemaid; secondly, because he had systematically absented himself from the house during the most of his sister's visit, preferring to take his sister away with him for drives and walks rather than to stay in the noisy confusion of toys and babies that his home had become. Because of all this, therefore, he was totally unprepared for what his son was bringing to him.

He welcomed the young man with affectionate heartiness.

"Well, my boy, it's good to see you! Where have you been keeping yourself all these two weeks?"

"Why, dad, I've been right here — in fact, I've been very much right here!"

The conscious color that crept to the boy's forehead should have been illuminating. But it was not.

"Yes, yes, very likely, very likely," frowned the man. "But, of course, with so many around — But soon we'll be by ourselves again. Not but what

I'm enjoying your aunt's visit, of course," he added hastily. "But here are two weeks of your vacation gone, and I've scarcely seen you a minute."

"Yes; and that's one thing I wanted to talk about — college," plunged in the boy. "I've decided I don't want to finish my course, dad. I'd rather go into business right away."

The man drew his brows together, but did not look entirely displeased.

"Hm-m, well," he hesitated. "While I should hate not to see you graduated, yet — it's not so bad an idea, after all. I'd be glad to have you here for good that much earlier, son. But why this sudden right-about-face? I thought you were particularly keen for that degree."

Again the telltale color flamed in the boyish cheeks.

"I was — once. But, you see, then I was n't thinking of — getting married."

"Married!" To John Denby it seemed suddenly that a paralyzing chill clutched his heart and made it skip a beat. This possible future marriage of his son, breaking into their close companionship, was the dreaded shadow that loomed ever ahead. "Nonsense, boy! Time enough to think of that when you've found the girl."

"But I have found her, dad."

John Denby paled perceptibly.

"You have — what?" he demanded. "You don't mean that you've — Who is she?"

"Helen. Why, dad, you seem surprised," laughed the boy. "Have n't you noticed — suspected?"

"Well, no, I have n't," retorted the man grimly. "Why should I? I never heard of the young lady before. What is this — some college tomfoolery? I might have known, I suppose, what would happen."

"College! Why, dad, she's *here*. You know her. It's Helen, — Miss Barnet."

"Here! There's no one here but your aunt and —" He stopped, and half started from his chair. "You don't — you can't mean — your aunt's nursemaid!"

At the scornful emphasis an indignant red dyed the boy's face.

"I did n't think that of you, dad," he rebuked.

Angry as he was, the man was conscious of the hurt the words gave him. But he held his ground.

"And I did not think this of you, Burke," he rejoined coldly.

"You mean —"

"I mean that I supposed my son would show some consideration as to the woman he chose for his wife."

"Father!" The boyish face set into stern lines. The boyish figure drew itself erect with a majesty that would have been absurd had it not been so palpably serious. "I can't stand much of this sort of thing, even from you. Miss Barnet is everything that is good and true and lovely. She is in every way worthy —more than worthy. Besides, she is the woman I love — the woman I have asked to be my wife. Please remember that when you speak of her."

John Denby laughed lightly. Sharp words had very evidently been on the end of his tongue, when, with a sudden change of countenance, he relaxed in his chair, and said: —

"Well done, Burke. Your sentiments do you credit, I'm sure. But are n't we getting a little melodramatic? I feel as if I were on the stage of a second-rate theater! However, I stand corrected; and we 'll speak very respectfully of the lady hereafter. I have no doubt she is very good and very lovely, as you say; but" — his mouth hardened a little — "I must still insist that she is no fit wife for my son."

"Why not?"

"Obvious reasons."

"I suppose you mean — because she has to work for her living," flashed the boy. "But that — excuse me — seems to me plain snobbishness. And I must say again I did n't think it of you, dad. I supposed —"

"Come, come, this has gone far enough," interrupted the distraught, sorely tried father of an idolized son. "You're only a boy. You don't know your own mind. You 'll fancy yourself in love a dozen times yet before the time comes for you to marry."

"I'm not a boy. I'm a man grown."

"You're not twenty-one yet."

"I shall be next month. And I *do* know my own mind. You'll see, father, when I'm married."

"But you're not going to be married at present. And you're never going to marry this nursemaid."

"Father!"

"I mean what I say."

"You won't give your consent?"

"Never!"

"Then — I'll do it without, after next month."

There was a tense moment of silence. Father and son faced each other, angry resentment in their eyes. Then, with a sharp ejaculation, John Denby got to his feet and strode to the window. When he turned a minute later and came back, the angry resentment was gone. His mouth was stern, but his eyes were pleading. He came straight to his son and put both hands on his shoulders.

"Burke, listen to me," he begged. "I'm doing this for two reasons. First, to save you from yourself. You've known this girl scarcely two weeks — hardly an adequate preparation for a lifetime of living together. And just here comes in the second reason. However good and lovely she may be, she could n't possibly qualify for that long lifetime together, Burke. Simply because she works for her living has nothing to do with it. She has not the tastes or the training that should belong to your wife — that *must* belong to your wife if she is to make you happy, if she is to take the place of — your mother. And that is the place your wife will take, of course, Burke."

Under the restraining hands on his shoulders the boy stirred restlessly.

"Tastes! Training! What do I care for that? She suits my tastes."

"She would n't — for long."

"You wait and see."

"Too great a risk to run, my boy."

"I'll risk it. I'm going to risk it."

Again there was a moment's silence. Again the stern lines deepened around the man's lips. Then very quietly there came the words: —

"Burke, if you marry this girl, you will choose between her and me. It seems to me that I ought not to need to tell you that you cannot bring her here. She shall never occupy your mother's chair as the mistress of this house."

"That settles it, then: I'll take her somewhere else."

If Burke had not been so blind with passion he would have seen and felt the anguish that leaped to his father's eyes. But he did not stop to see or to feel. He snapped out the words, jerked himself free, and left the room.

This did not "settle it," however. There were more words — words common to stern parents and amorous youths and maidens since time immemorial. A father, appalled at the catastrophe that threatened, not only his cherished companionship with his only son, but, in his opinion, the revered sanctity of his wife's memory, wrapped himself in forbidding dignity. An impetuous lover, torn between the old love of years and the new, quite different one of weeks, alternately stormed and pleaded. A young girl, undisciplined, very much in love, and smarting with hurt pride and resentment, blew hot and cold in a manner that tended to drive every one concerned

to distraction. As soon as possible a shocked, distressed Sister Eunice packed her trunks and betook herself and her offending household away.

In time, then, a compromise was effected. Burke should leave college immediately and go into the Works with his father, serving a short apprenticeship from the bottom up, as had been planned for him, that he might be the master of the business, in deed as well as in name, when he should some day take his father's place. Meanwhile, for one year, he was not to see or to communicate with Helen Barnet. If at the end of the year, he was still convinced that his only hope of happiness lay in marriage to this girl, all opposition would be withdrawn and he might marry when he pleased — though even then he must not expect to bring his bride to the old home. They must set up an establishment for themselves.

"We should prefer that, — under the circumstances," had been the prompt and somewhat haughty rejoinder, much to the father's discomfiture.

Grieved and dismayed as he was at the airy indifference with which his son appeared to face a fatherless future, John Denby was yet pinning his faith on that year of waiting. Given twelve months with the boy quite to himself, free from the hateful spell of this designing young woman, and there could be no question of the result — in John Denby's mind. In all confidence, therefore, and with every sense alert to make this year as perfect as a year could be, John Denby set himself to the task before him.

It was just here, however, that for John Denby the ghosts walked — ghosts of innumerable toy pistols and frosted cakes. Burke Denby, accustomed all his life to having what he wanted, and having it *when* he wanted it, moped the first week, sulked the second, covertly rebelled the third, and ran away the last day of the fourth, leaving behind him the customary note, which, in this case, read: —

Dear Dad: I've gone to Helen. I had to. I've lived a *year* of misery in this last month: so, as far as I am concerned, I *have* waited my year already. We shall be married at once. I wrote Helen last week, and she consented.

Now, dad, you'll just have to forgive me. I'm twenty-one. I'm a man now, not a boy, and a man has to decide these things for himself. And Helen's a dear. You'll see, when you know her. We'll be back in two weeks. Now don't bristle up. I'm not going to bring her home, of course (at present), after the very cordial invitation you gave me not to! We're going into one of the Reddington apartments. With my allowance and my — er — wages (!) we can manage that all right — until "the stern parent" relents and takes his daughter home — as he should!

Good-bye,

BURKE.

John Denby read the letter once, twice; then he pulled the telephone toward him and gave a few crisp orders to James Brett, his general manager. His voice was steady and — to the man at the other end of the wire — ominously emotionless. When he had finished talking five minutes later, certain words had been uttered that would materially change the immediate

future of a certain willful youth just then setting out on his honeymoon.

There would be, for Burke Denby, no "Reddington apartment." There would also be no several-other-things; for there would be no "allowance" after the current month. There would be only the "wages," and the things the wages could buy.

There was no disputing the fact that John Denby was very angry. But he was also sorely distressed and grieved. Added to his indignation that his son should have so flouted him was his anguish of heart that the old days of ideal companionship were now gone forever. There was, too, his very real fear for the future happiness of his boy, bound in marriage to a woman he believed would prove to be a most uncongenial mate. But overtopping all, just now, was his wrath at the flippant assurance of his son's note, and the very evident confidence in a final forgiveness that the note showed. It was this that caused the giving of those stern, momentous orders over the telephone — John Denby himself had been somewhat in the habit of having his own way!

The harassed father did not sleep much that night. Until far into the morning hours he sat before the fireless grate in his library, thinking. He looked old, worn, and wholly miserable. In his hand, and often under his gaze, was the miniature of a beautiful woman — his wife.

CHAPTER III

HONEYMOON DAYS

It was on a cool, cloudy day in early September that Mr. and Mrs. Burke Denby arrived at Dalton from their wedding trip.

With characteristic inclination to avoid anything unpleasant, the young husband had neglected to tell his wife that they were not to live in the Denby Mansion. He had argued with himself that she would find it out soon enough, anyway, and that there was no reason why he should spoil their wedding trip with disagreeable topics of conversation. Burke always liked to put off disagreeable things till the last.

Helen was aware, it is true, that Burke's father was much displeased at the marriage; but that this displeasure had gone so far as to result in banishment from the home, she did not know. She had been planning, indeed, just how she would win her father-in-law over — just how sweet and lovely and daughterly she would be, as a member of the Denby household; and so sure was she of victory that already she counted the battle half won.

In the old days of her happy girlhood, Helen Barnet had taken as a matter of course the succumbing of everything and everybody to her charm and beauty. And although this feeling had, perforce, been in abeyance for some eighteen months, it had been very

rapidly coming back to her during the past two weeks, under the devoted homage of her young husband and the admiring eyes of numberless strangers along their honeymoon way.

It was a complete and disagreeable surprise to her now, therefore, when Burke said to her, a trifle nervously, as they were nearing Dalton: —

"We'll have to go to a hotel, of course, Helen, for a few days, till we get the apartment ready. But 't won't be for long, dear."

"Hotel! Apartment! Why, Burke, are n't we going home — to *your* home?"

"Oh, no, dear. We're going to have a home of our own, you know — *our* home."

"No, I did n't know." Helen's lips showed a decided pout.

"But you'll like it, dear. You just wait and see." The man spoke with determined cheeriness.

"But I can't like it better than your old home, Burke. I *know* what that is, and I'd much rather go there."

"Yes, yes, but—" Young Denby paused to wet his dry lips. "Er — you know, dear, dad was n't exactly — er — pleased with the marriage, anyway, and —"

"That's just it," broke in the bride eagerly. "That's one reason I wanted to go there — to show him, you know. Why, Burke, I'd got it all planned out lovely, how nice I was going to be to him — get his paper and slippers, and kiss him good-morning, and —"

"Holy smoke! Kiss —" Just in time the fastidious son of a still more fastidious father pulled himself up; but to a more discerning bride, his face would already have finished his sentence. "Er — but —well, anyhow, dear," he stammered, "that's very kind of you, of course; but you see it's useless even to think of it. He — he has forbidden us to go there."

"Why, the mean old thing!"

"Helen!"

Helen's face showed a frown as well as a pout.

"I don't care. He is mean, if he is your father, not to let —"

"Helen!"

At the angry sharpness of the man's voice Helen stopped abruptly. For a moment she gazed at her husband with reproachful eyes. Then her chin began to quiver, her breath to come in choking little gasps, and the big tears to roll down her face.

"Why, Burke, I —"

"Oh, great Scott! Helen, dearest, don't, *please!*" begged the dismayed and distracted young husband, promptly capitulating at the awful sight of tears of which he was the despicable cause. "Darling, don't!"

"But you never sp-poke like that to me b-before," choked the wife of a fortnight.

"I know. I was a brute — so I was! But, sweetheart, *please* stop," he pleaded desperately. "See, we're just pulling into Dalton. You don't want them to see you crying — a bride!"

Mrs. Burke Denby drew in her breath convulsively,

and lifted a hurried hand to brush the tears from her eyes. The next moment she smiled, tremulously, but adorably. She looked very lovely as she stepped from the car a little later; and Burke Denby's heart swelled with love and pride as he watched her. If underneath the love and pride there was a vague something not so pleasant, the man told himself it was only a natural regret at having said anything to cast the slightest shadow on the home-coming of this dear girl whom he had asked to share his life. Whatever this vague something was, anyway, Burke resolutely put it behind him, and devoted himself all the more ardently to the comfort of his young wife.

In spite of himself, Burke could not help looking for his father's face at the station. Never before had he come home (when not with his father), and not been welcomed by that father's eager smile and outstretched hand. He missed them both now. Otherwise he was relieved to see few people he knew, as he stepped to the platform, though he fully realized, from the sly winks and covert glances, that every one knew who he was, and who also was the lady at his side.

With only an occasional perfunctory greeting, and no introductions, therefore, the somewhat embarrassed and irritated bridegroom hurried his bride into a public carriage, and gave the order to drive to the Hancock Hotel.

All the way there he talked very fast and very tenderly of the new home that was soon to be theirs.

"'T will be only for a little — the hotel, dear," he plunged in at once. "And you won't mind it, for a little, while we're planning, will you, darling? I'm going to rent one of the Reddington apartments. You remember them — on Reddington Avenue; white stone with dandy little balconies between the big bay windows. They were just being finished when you were here. They're brand-new, you see. And we'll be so happy, there, dearie, — just us two!"

"Us two! But, Burke, there'll be three. There'll have to be the hired girl, too, you know," fluttered the new wife, in quick panic. "Surely you are n't going to make me do without a hired girl!"

"Oh, no — no, indeed," asserted the man, all the more hurriedly, because he never had thought of a "hired girl," and because he was rather fearfully wondering how much his father paid for the maids, anyway. There would have to be one, of course; but he wondered if his allowance would cover it, with all the rest. Still, he *could* smoke a cigar or two less a day, he supposed, if it came to a pinch, and — but Helen was speaking.

"Dear, dear, but you did give me a turn, Burke! You see, there'll just have to be a hired girl — that is, if you want anything to eat, sir," she laughed, showing all her dimples. (And Burke loved her dimples!) "I can't cook a little bit. I never did at home, you know, and I should hate it, I'm sure. It's so messy — sticky dough and dishes, and all that!" Again she laughed and showed all her dimples,

looking so altogether bewitching that Burke almost — but not quite — stole a kiss. He decided, too, on the spot, that he would rather never smoke another cigar than to subject this adorable little thing at his side to any task that had to do with the hated "messy dough and sticky dishes." Indeed he would!

Something of this must have shown in his face, for the little bride beamed anew, and the remainder of the drive was a blissfully happy duet of fascinating plans regarding this new little nest of a home.

All this was at four o'clock. At eight o'clock Burke Denby came into their room at the hotel with a white face and tense lips.

"Well, Helen, we're in for it," he flung out, dropping himself into the nearest chair.

"What do you mean?"

"Father has cut off my allowance."

"But you — you've gone to work. There's your wages!"

"Oh, yes, there are my — wages."

Something in his tone sent a swift suspicion to her eyes.

"Do you mean — they are n't so big as your allowance?"

"I certainly do."

"How perfectly horrid! Just as if it was n't mean enough for him not to let us live there, without —"

"Helen!" Burke Denby pulled himself up in his chair. "See here, dear, I shan't let even you say things like that about dad. Now, for heaven's sake,

don't let us quarrel about it," he pleaded impatiently, as he saw the dreaded quivering coming to the pouting lips opposite.

"But I — I —"

"Helen, dearest, don't cry, please don't! Crying won't help; and I tell you it's serious business — this is."

"But are you sure — do you know it's true?" faltered the young wife, too thoroughly frightened now to be angry. "Did you see — your father?"

"No; I saw Brett."

"Who's he? Maybe he does n't know."

"Oh, yes, he does," returned Burke, with grim emphasis. "He knows everything. They say at the Works that he knows what father's going to have for breakfast before the cook does."

"But who is he?"

"He's the head manager of the Denby Iron Works and father's right-hand man. He came here to-night to see me — by dad's orders, I suspect."

"Is your father so awfully angry, then?" Her eyes had grown a bit wistful.

"I'm afraid he is. He says I've made my bed and now I must lie in it. He's cut off my allowance entirely. He's raised my wages — a little, and he says it's up to me now to make good — with my wages."

There was a minute's silence. The man's eyes were gloomily fixed on the opposite wall. His whole attitude spelled disillusion and despair. The woman's eyes, questioning, fearful, were fixed on the man.

Plainly some new, hidden force was at work within Helen Denby's heart. Scorn and anger had left her countenance. Grief and dismay had come in their place.

"Burke, *why* has your father objected so to — to me?" she asked at last, timidly.

Abstractedly, as if scarcely conscious of what he was saying, the man shrugged: —

"Oh, the usual thing. He said you were n't suited to me; you would n't make me happy."

The wife recoiled visibly. She gave a piteous little cry. It was too low, apparently, to reach her husband's ears. At all events, he did not turn. For fully half a minute she watched him, and in her shrinking eyes was mirrored each eloquent detail of his appearance, the lassitude, the gloom, the hopelessness. Then, suddenly, to her whole self there came an electric change. As if throwing off bonds that held her she flung out her arms and sprang toward him.

"Burke, it is n't true, it is n't true," she flamed. "I'm going to make you happy! You just wait and see. And we'll show him. We'll show him we can do it! He told you to make good; and you must, Burke! I won't have him and everybody else saying I dragged you down. I won't! I *won't!* I WON'T!"

Burke Denby's first response was to wince involuntarily at the shrill crescendo of his wife's voice. His next was to shrug his shoulders irritably as the meaning of her words came to him.

"Nonsense, Helen, don't be a goose!" he scowled.

"I'm not a goose. I'm your wife," choked Helen, still swayed by the exaltation that had mastered her. "And I'm going to help you win—*win*, I say! Do you hear me, Burke?"

"Of course I hear you, Helen; and — so'll everybody else, if you don't look out. *Please* speak lower, Helen!"

She was too intent and absorbed to be hurt or vexed. Obediently she dropped her voice almost to a whisper.

"Yes, yes, I know, Burke; and I will, I will, dear." She fell on her knees at his side. "But it seems as if I must shout it to the world. I want to go out on the street here and scream it at the top of my voice, till your father in his great big useless house on the hill just has to hear me."

"Helen, Helen!" shivered her husband.

But she hurried on feverishly.

"Burke, listen! You're going to make good. Do you hear? We'll show them. We'll never let them say they — beat us!"

"But — but —"

"We are n't going to say 'but' and hang back. We're going to *do !*"

"But, Helen, how? What?" demanded the man, stirred into a show of interest at last. "How can we?"

"I don't know, but we 're going to do it."

" There won't be — hardly any money."

"I'll get along — somehow."

"And we'll have to live in a cheap little hole somewhere — we can't have one of the Reddingtons."

"I don't want it — now."

"And you'll have to — to work."

"Yes, I know." Her chin was still bravely lifted.

"There can't be any — maid now."

"Then you'll have to eat — what I cook!" She drew in her breath with a hysterical little laugh that was half a sob.

"You darling! I shall love it!" He caught her to himself in a revulsion of feeling that was as ardent as it was sudden. "Only I'll so hate to have you do it, sweetheart — it's so messy and doughy!"

"Nonsense!"

"You told me it was."

"But I did n't know then — what they were saying about me. Burke, they just shan't say I'm dragging you down."

"Indeed they shan't, darling."

"Then you will make good?" she regarded him with tearful, luminous eyes.

"Of course I will — with *you* to help me."

Her face flamed into radiant joy.

"Yes, *with me to help!* That's it, that's it — I'm going to *help* you," she breathed fervently, flinging her arms about his neck.

And to each, from the dear stronghold of the other's arms, at the moment, the world looked, indeed, to be a puny thing, scarcely worth the conquering.

CHAPTER IV

NEST-BUILDING

It is so much easier to say than to do. But nothing in the experience of either Burke Denby or of Helen, his wife, had demonstrated this fact for them. Quite unprepared, therefore, and with confident courage, they proceeded to pass from the saying to the doing.

True, in the uncompromising sunlight of the next morning, the world did look a bit larger, a shade less easily conquerable; and a distinctly unpleasant feeling of helplessness assailed both husband and wife. Yet with a gay "Now we'll go house-hunting right away so as to save paying here!" from Helen, and an adoring "You darling — but it's a burning shame!" from Burke, the two sallied forth, after the late hotel breakfast.

The matter of selecting the new home was not a difficult one — at first. They decided at once that, if they could not have an apartment in the Reddington Chambers, they would prefer a house. "For," Burke said, "as for being packed away like sardines in one of those abominable little cheap flat-houses, I won't!" So a house they looked for at the start. And very soon they found what Helen said was a "love of a place" — a pretty little cottage with a tiny lawn and a flower-bed.

"And it's so lucky it's for rent," she exulted. "For it's just what we want, is n't it, dearie?"

"Y-yes; but —"

"Why, Burke, don't you like it? *I* think it's a dear! Of course it is n't like your father's house. But we can't expect that."

"Expect that! Great Scott, Helen, — we can't expect this!" cried the man.

"Why, Burke, what do you mean?"

"It'll cost too much, dear, — in this neighborhood. We can't afford it."

"Oh, that'll be all right. I'll economize somewhere else. Come; it says the key is next door."

"Yes, but, Helen, dearest, I know we can't —" But "Helen, dearest," was already halfway up the adjoining walk; and Burke, with a despairing glance at her radiant, eager face, followed her. There was, indeed, no other course open to him, as he knew, unless he chose to make a scene on the public thoroughfare — and Burke Denby did not like scenes.

The house was found to be as attractive inside as it was out; and Helen's progress from room to room was a series of delighted exclamations. She was just turning to go upstairs when her husband's third desperate expostulation brought her feet and her tongue to a pause.

"Helen, darling, I tell you we can't!" he was exclaiming. "It's out of the question."

"Burke!" Her lips began to quiver. "And when you know how much I want it!"

"Sweetheart, don't, please, make it any harder for me," he begged. "I'd give you a dozen houses like this if I could — and you know it. But we can't afford even this one. The rent is forty dollars. I heard her tell you when she gave you the key."

"Never mind. We can economize other ways."

"But, Helen, I only get sixty all told. We can't pay forty for rent."

"Oh, but, Burke, that leaves twenty, and we can do a lot on twenty. Just as if what we ate would cost us that! I don't care for meat, anyhow, much. We'll cut that out. And I hate grapefruit and olives. They cost a lot. Mrs. Allen was always having them, and —"

The distraught husband interrupted with an impatient gesture.

"Grapefruit and olives, indeed! And as if food were all of it! Where are our clothes and coal and — and doctor's bills, and I don't-know-what-all coming from? Why, great Scott, Helen, I smoke half that in a week, sometimes, — not that I shall now, of course," he added hastily. "But, honestly, dearie, we simply can't do it. Now, come, be a good girl, and let's go on. We're simply wasting time here."

Helen, convinced at last, tossed him the key, with a teary "All right — take it back then. I shan't! I know I should c-cry right before her!" The next minute, at sight of the abject woe and dismay on her husband's face, she flung herself upon him with a burst of sobs.

"There, there, Burke, here I am, so soon, making a fuss because we can't afford things! But I won't any more — truly I won't! I was a mean, horrid old thing! Yes, I was," she reiterated in answer to his indignant denial. "Come, let's go quick!" she exclaimed, pulling herself away, and lifting her head superbly. "I don't want the old place, anyhow. Truly, I don't!" And, with a dazzling smile, she reached out her hand and tripped enticingly ahead of him toward the door; while the man, bewildered, but enthralled by this extraordinary leap from fretful stubbornness to gay docility, hurried after her with an incoherent jumble of rapturous adjectives.

Such was Mr. and Mrs. Burke Denby's first experience of home-hunting. The second, though different in detail, was similar in disappointment. So also were the third and the fourth experiences. Not, indeed, until the weary, distracted pair had spent three days in time, all their patience, and most of their good nature, did they finally arrive at a decision. And then their selection, alas, proved to be one of the despised tiny flats, in which, according to the unhappy young bridegroom, they were destined to be packed like sardines.

After all, it had been the "elegant mirror in the parlor," and the "just grand" tiled and tessellated entrance, that had been the determining factors in the decision; for Burke, thankful that at last something within reach of his pocketbook had been found to bring a sparkle to his beloved's eyes, had stifled

his own horror at the tawdry cheapness of it all, and had given a consent that was not without a measure of relief born of the three long days of weary, well-nigh hopeless search.

Dalton, like most manufacturing towns of fifteen or twenty thousand souls, had all the diversity of a much larger place. There was West Hill, where were the pillared and porticoed residences of the pretentious and the pretending, set in painfully new, wide-sweeping, flower-bordered lawns; and there was Valley Street, a double line of ramshackle wooden buildings with broken steps and shutterless windows, where a blade of grass was a stranger and a flower unknown, save for perhaps a sickly geranium on a tenement window sill. There was Old Dalton, with its winding, tree-shaded streets clambering all over the slope of Elm Hill, where old colonial mansions, with an air of aloofness (borrowed quite possibly from their occupants), seemed ever to be withdrawing farther and farther away from plebeian noise and publicity. There was, of course, the mill district, where were the smoke-belching chimneys and great black buildings that meant the town's bread and butter; and there were the adjoining streets of workmen's houses, fitted to give a sensitive soul the horrors, so seemingly endless was the repetition of covered stoop and dormer window, always exactly the same, as far as eye could reach. There was, too, the bustling, asphalted, brick-blocked business center; and there were numerous streets of simple, pretty

cottages, and substantial residences, among which, with growing frequency, there were beginning to appear the tall, many-windowed apartment houses, ranging all the way from the exclusive, expensive Reddington Chambers down to the flimsy structures like the one whose tawdry ornamentation had caught the fancy of Burke Denby's village-bred wife.

To Burke Denby himself, late of Denby House (perhaps the most aloof of all the "old colonials"), the place was a nightmare of horror. But because his wife's eyes had glistened, and because his wife's lips had caroled a joyous "Oh, Burke, I'd *love* this place, darling!" — and because, most important of all, if it must be confessed, the rent was only twenty dollars a month, he had uttered a grim "All right, we'll take it." And the selection of the home was accomplished.

Not until they were on the way to the hotel that night did there come to the young husband the full realizing sense that housekeeping meant furniture.

"Oh, of course I *knew* it did," he groaned, half-laughingly, after his first despairing ejaculation. "But I just did n't think; that's all. Our furniture at home we'd always had. But of course it does have to be bought — at first."

"Of course! And *I* did n't think, either," laughed Helen. "You see, we'd always had *our* furniture, too, I guess. But then, it'll be grand to buy it. I love new things!"

Burke Denby frowned.

"Buy it! That's all right — if we had the money

to pay. Heaven only knows how much it'll cost. I don't."

"But, Burke, you've got *some* money, haven't you? You took a big roll out of your pocket last night."

He gave her a scornful glance.

"Big roll, indeed! How far do you suppose that would go toward furnishing a home? Of course I've got some money — a little left from my allowance — but that does n't mean I've got enough to furnish a home."

"Then let's give up housekeeping and board," proposed Helen. "Then we won't have to buy any furniture. And I think I'd like it better anyhow; and I *know* you would — after you'd sampled my cooking," she finished laughingly.

But her husband did not smile. The frown only deepened as he ejaculated: —

"Board! Not much, Helen! We *could n't* board at a decent place. 'T would cost too much. And as for the cheap variety — great Scott, Helen! I wonder if you think I'd stand for that! Heaven knows we'll be enough gossiped about, as it is, without our planting ourselves right under the noses of half the tabby-cats in town for them to 'oh' and 'ah' and 'um' every time we turn around or don't turn around! No, ma'am, Helen! We'll shut ourselves up somewhere within four walls we can call home, even if we have to furnish it with only two chairs and a bed and a kitchen stove. It'll be ours — and we'll be where we won't be stared at."

Helen laughed lightly.

"Dear, dear, Burke, how you do run on! Just as if one minded a little staring! I rather like it, myself, — if I know my clothes and my back hair are all right."

"Ugh! Helen!"

"Well, I do," she laughed, uptilting her chin. "It makes one feel so sort of — er — important. But I won't say 'board' again, *never*, — unless you begin to scold at my cooking," she finished with an arch glance.

"As if I could do that!" cried the man promptly, again the adoring husband. "I shall love everything you do — just because it's *you* that do it. The only trouble will be, *you* won't get enough to eat — because I shall want to eat it all!"

"You darling! Aren't you the best ever!" she cooed, giving his arm a surreptitious squeeze. "But, really, you know, I am going to be a bang-up cook. I've got a cookbook."

"So soon? Where did you get that?"

"Yesterday, while you went into Stoddard's for that house-key. I saw one in the window next door and I went in and bought it. 'T was two dollars, so it ought to be a good one. And that makes me think. It took all the money I had, 'most, in my purse. So I — I'm afraid I'll have to have some more, dear."

"Why, of course, of course! You must n't go without money a minute." And the young husband, with all the alacrity of a naturally generous nature

supplemented by the embarrassment of this new experience of being asked for money by the girl he loved, plunged his hand into his pocket and crowded two bills into her unresisting fingers. "There! And I won't be so careless again, dear. I don't ever mean you to have to *ask* for money, sweetheart."

"Oh, thank you," she murmured, tucking the bills into her little handbag. "I shan't need any more for ever so long, I'm sure. I'm going to be economical *now*, you know."

"Of course you are. You're going to be a little brick. *I* know."

"And we won't mind anything if we're only together," she breathed.

"There won't be anything to mind," he answered fervently, with an ardent glance that would have been a kiss had it not been for the annoying presence of a few score of Dalton's other inhabitants on the street together with themselves.

The next minute they reached the hotel.

At nine o'clock the following morning Mr. and Mrs. Burke Denby sallied forth to buy the furniture for their "tenement," as Helen called it, until her husband's annoyed remonstrances changed the word to "apartment."

Burke Denby learned many things during the next few hours. He learned first that tables and chairs and beds and stoves — really decent ones that a fellow could endure the sight of — cost a prodigious amount of money. But, to offset this, and to make life really

worth the living, after all, it seemed that one might buy a quantity sufficient for one's needs, and pay for them in installments, week by week. This idea, while not wholly satisfactory, seemed the only way of stretching their limited means to cover their many needs; and, after some hesitation, it was adopted.

There remained then only the matter of selection; and it was just here that Burke Denby learned something else. He learned that two people, otherwise apparently in perfect accord, could disagree most violently over the shape of a chair or the shade of a rug. Indeed, he would not have believed it possible that such elements of soul torture could lie in a mere matter of color or texture. And how any one with eyes and sensibilities could wish to select for one's daily companions such a mass of gingerbread decoration and glaring colors as seemed to meet the fancy of his wife, he could not understand. Neither could he understand why all his selections and preferences were promptly dubbed "dingy" and "homely," nor why nothing that he liked pleased her at all. As such was certainly the case, however, he came to express these preferences less and less frequently. And in the end he always bought what she wanted, particularly as the price on her choice was nearly always lower than the one on his — which was an argument in its favor that he found it hard to refute.

Tractable as he was as to quality, however, he did have to draw a sharp line as to quantity; for Helen — with the cheerful slogan, "Why, it's only

twenty-five cents a week more, Burke!" — seemed not to realize that there was a limit even to the number of those one might spend — on sixty dollars a month. True, at the beginning she did remind him that they could "eat less" till they "got the things paid for," and that her clothes were "all new, anyhow, being a bride, so!" But she had not said that again. Perhaps because she saw the salesman turn his back to laugh, and perhaps because she was a little frightened at the look on her husband's face. At all events, when Burke did at last insist that they had bought quite enough, she acquiesced with some measure of grace.

Burke himself, when the shopping was finished, drew a sigh of relief, yet with an inward shudder at the recollection of certain things marked "Sold to Burke Denby."

"Oh, well," he comforted himself. "Helen's happy — and that's the main thing; and I shan't see them much. I'm away days and asleep nights." Nor did it occur to him that this was not the usual attitude of a supposedly proud bridegroom toward his new little nest of a home.

Getting settled in the little Dale Street apartment was, so far as Burke was concerned, a mere matter of moving from the hotel and dumping the contents of his trunk into his new chiffonier and closet. True, Helen, looking tired and flurried (and not nearly so pretty as usual), brought to him some borrowed tools, together with innumerable curtains and rods and

nails and hooks that simply must be put up, she said, before she could do a thing. But Burke, after a half-hearted trial, — during which he mashed his thumb and bored three holes in wrong places, — flew into a passion of irritability, and bade her get the janitor who "owned the darn things" to do the job, and to pay him what he asked — 't would be worth it, no matter what it was!

With a very hasty kiss then Burke banged out of the house and headed for the Denby Iron Works.

It was not alone the curtains or the offending hammer that was wrong with Burke Denby that morning. The time had come when he must not only meet his fellow employees, and take his place among them, but he must face his father. And he was dreading yet longing to see his father. He had not seen him since he bade him good-night and went upstairs to his own room the month before — to write that farewell note.

Once, since coming back from his wedding trip, he had been tempted to leave town and never see his father again — until he should have made for himself the name and the money that he was going to make. Then he would come back and cry: "Behold, this is I, your son, and this is Helen, my wife, who, you see, has *not* dragged me down!" He would not, of course, *talk* like that. But he would show them. He would! This had been when he first learned from Brett of the allowance-cutting, and of his father's implacable anger.

Then had come the better, braver decision. He would stay where he was. He would make the name and the money right here, under his father's very eyes. It would be harder, of course; but there would then be all the more glory in the winning. Besides, to leave now would look like defeat — would make one seem almost like a quitter. And his father hated quitters! He would like to show his father. He *would* show his father. And he would show him right here. And had not Helen, his dear wife, said that she would aid him? As if he could help winning out under those circumstances!

It was with thoughts such as these that he went now to meet his father. Especially was he thinking of Helen, dear Helen, — poor Helen, struggling back there with those abominable hooks and curtains. And he had been such a brute to snap her up so crossly! He would not do it again. It was only that he was so dreading this first meeting with his father. After that it would be easier. There would not be anything then only just to keep steadily going till he'd made good — he and Helen. But now — father would be proud to see how finely he was taking it!

With chin up and shoulders back, therefore, Burke Denby walked into his father's office.

"Well, father," he began, with cheery briskness. Then, instantly, voice and manner changed as he took a hurried step forward. "Dad, what is it? Are you ill?"

So absorbed had Burke Denby been over the part he himself was playing in this little drama of Denby and Son, that he had given no thought as to the probable looks or actions of any other member of the cast. He was quite unprepared, therefore, for the change in the man he now saw before him — the pallor, the shrunken cheeks, the stooped shoulders, the unmistakable something that made the usually erect, debonair man look suddenly worn and old.

"Dad, you are ill!" exclaimed Burke in dismay.

John Denby got to his feet at once. He even smiled and held out his hand. Yet Burke, who took the hand, felt suddenly that there were uncounted miles of space between them.

"Ah, Burke, how are you? No, I'm not ill at all. And you — are you well?"

"Er — ah — oh, yes, very well — er — very well."

"That's good. I'm glad."

There was a brief pause. A torrent of words swept to the tip of the younger man's tongue; but nothing found voice except another faltering "Er — yes, very well!" which Burke had not meant to say at all. There was a second brief pause, then John Denby sat down.

"You will find Brett in his office. You have come to work, I dare say," he observed, as he turned to the letters on his desk.

"Er — yes," stammered the young man. The next moment he found himself alone, white and shaken, the other side of his father's door.

To work? Oh, yes, he had come to work; but he had come first to talk. There were a whole lot of things he had meant to say to his father. First, of course, there would have had to be something in the nature of an apology or the like to patch up the quarrel. Then he would tell him how he was really going to make good — he and Helen. After that they could get down to one of their old-time chats. They always had been chums — he and dad; and they had n't had a talk for four weeks. Why, for three weeks he had been saving up a story, a dandy story that dad would appreciate! And there were other things, serious things, that —

And here already he had seen his father, and it was over. And he had not said a word — nothing of what he had meant to say. He believed he would go back —

With an angry gesture Burke Denby turned and extended his hand halfway toward the closed door. Then, with an impatient shrug, he whirled about and strode toward the door marked "J. A. Brett, General Manager."

If young Denby had obeyed his first impulse and reëntered his father's office he would have found the man with his head bowed on the desk, his arms outflung.

John Denby, too, was white and shaken. He, too, had been dreading this meeting, and longing for it — that it might be over. There was now, however, on his part, no feeling of chagrin and impotence

because of things that had not been said. There was only a shuddering relief that things had *not* been said; that he had been able to carry it straight through as he had planned; that he had not shown his boy how much he — cared. He was glad that his pride had been equal to the strain; that he had not weakly succumbed at the first glimpse of his son's face, the first touch of his son's hand, as he had so feared that he would do.

And he had not succumbed — though he had almost gone down before the quick terror and affectionate dismay that had leaped into his son's voice and eyes at sight of his own changed appearance. (Why *could* not he keep those abominable portions of his anatomy from being so wretchedly telltale?) But he had remembered in time. Did the boy think, then, that a mere word of sympathy now could balance the scale against so base a disregard of everything loyal and filial a month ago? Then he would show that it could not.

And he had shown it.

What if he did know now, even better than he had known it all these last miserable four weeks, that his whole world had lain in his boy's hand, that his whole life had been bounded by his boy's smile, his whole soul immersed in his boy's future? What if he did know that all the power and wealth and fame of name that he had won were as the dust in his fingers — if he might not pass them on to his son? He was not going to let Burke know this. Indeed, no!

Burke had made his own bed. He should lie in it. Deliberately he had chosen to cast aside the love and companionship of a devoted father at the beck of an almost unknown girl's hand. Should the father then offer again the once-scorned love and companionship? Had he no pride — no proper sense of simple right and justice? No self-respect, even?

It was thus, and by arguments such as these, that John Denby had lashed himself into the state of apparently cool, courteous indifference that had finally carried him successfully through the interview just closed.

For a long time John Denby sat motionless, his arms outflung across the letters that might have meant so much, but that did mean so little, to him — now. Then slowly he raised his head and fixed somber, longing eyes on the door that had so recently closed behind his son.

The boy was in there with Brett now — his boy. He was being told that his wages for the present were to be fifteen dollars a week, and that he was expected to live within his income — that the wages were really very liberal, considering his probable value to the company at the first. He would begin at the bottom, as had been planned years ago; but with this difference: he would be promoted now only when he had earned it. He *would* have been pushed rapidly ahead to the top, had matters been as they once were. Now he must demonstrate and prove his ability.

All this Brett was telling Burke now. Poor Burke! Brett was so harsh, so uncompromising. As if it were n't tough enough to have to live on a paltry fifteen dollars a week, without —

John Denby sighed and rose to his feet. Aimlessly he fidgeted about the spacious, well-appointed office. Twice he turned toward the door as if to leave the room. Once he reached a hesitating hand toward the push-button on this desk. Then determinedly he sat down and picked up one of his letters.

Brett was right. It was the best way; the only way. And it was well, indeed, that Brett had been delegated to do the telling. If it had been himself now —! Shucks! If it had been himself, the boy would only have had to *look* his reproach — and his wages would have been doubled on the spot! Fifteen dollars a week — *Burke!* Why, the boy could not — Well, then, he need not have been so foolish, so headstrong, so heartlessly disregardful of his father's wishes. He had brought it upon himself, entirely, entirely!

Whereupon, with an angry exclamation, John Denby shifted about in his hand the letter which for three minutes he had been holding before his eyes upside down.

CHAPTER V

THE WIFE

HELEN DENBY had never doubted her ability to be a perfect wife. As a girl, her vision had pictured a beauteous creature moving through a glorified world of love and admiration, ease and affluence.

Later, at the time of her marriage to Burke Denby, her vision had altered sufficiently to present a picture of herself as the sweet good-angel of the old Denby Mansion, the forgiving young wife who lays up no malice against an unappreciative father-in-law. Even when, still later (upon their return from their wedding trip and upon her learning of John Denby's decree of banishment), the vision was necessarily warped and twisted all out of semblance to its original outlines, there yet remained unchanged the basic idea of perfect wifehood.

Helen saw herself now as the martyr wife whose superb courage and self-sacrifice were to be the stepping-stones of a husband's magnificent success. She would be guide, counselor, and friend. (Somewhere she had seen those words. She liked them very much.) Unswervingly she would hold Burke to his high purpose. Untiringly she would lead him ever toward his goal of "making good."

She saw herself the sweet, loving wife, graciously presiding over the well-kept home, always ready,

daintily gowned, to welcome his coming with a kiss, and to speed his going with a blessing. Then, when in due course he had won out, great would be her reward. With what sweet pride and gentle dignity would she accept the laurel wreath of praise (Helen had seen this expression somewhere, too, and liked it), which a remorseful but grateful world would hasten to lay at the feet of her who alone had made possible the splendid victory — the once despised, flouted wife — the wife who was to drag him down!

It was a pleasant picture, and Helen frequently dwelt upon it — especially the sweet-and-gentle-dignity-wife part. She found it particularly soothing during those first early days of housekeeping in the new apartment.

Not that she was beginning in the least to doubt her ability to be that perfect wife. It was only that to think of things as they would be was a pleasant distraction from thinking of things as they were. But of course it would be all right very soon, anyway, — just as soon as everything got nicely to running.

Helen did wonder sometimes why the getting of "everything nicely to running" was so difficult. That a certain amount of training and experience was necessary to bring about the best results never occurred to her. If Helen had been asked to take a position as stenographer or church soloist, she would have replied at once that she did not know how to do the work. Into the position of home-maker, how-

ever, she stepped with cheerful confidence, her eyes only on the wonderful success she was going to make.

To Helen housekeeping was something like a clock that you wound up in the morning to run all day. And even when at the end of a week she could not help seeing that not once yet had she got around to being the "sweet, daintily gowned wife welcoming her husband to a well-kept home," before that husband appeared at the door, she still did not doubt her own capabilities. It was only that "things had n't got to running yet." And it was always somebody else's fault, anyway, — frequently her husband's. For if he did not come to dinner too early, before a thing was done, he was sure to be late, and thus spoil everything by her trying to keep things hot for him. And, of course, under such circumstances, nobody could *expect* one to be a sweet and daintily gowned wife!

Besides, there was the cookbook.

"Do you know, Burke," she finally wailed one night, between sobs, "I don't believe it's good for a thing — that old cookbook! I have n't got a thing out of it yet that's been real good. I've half a mind to take it back where I got it, and make them change it, or else give me back my money. I have, so there!"

"But, dearie," began her husband doubtfully, "you said yourself yesterday that you forgot the salt in the omelet, and the baking powder in the cake, and —"

"Well, what if I did?" she contended aggrievedly.

"What's a little salt or baking powder? 'T was n't but a pinch or a spoonful, anyhow, and I remembered all the other things. Besides, if those rules were any good they'd be worded so I *could n't* forget part of the things. And, anyhow, I don't think it's very nice of you to b-blame me all the time when I'm doing the very best I can. I *told* you I could n't cook, but you *said* you'd like anything I made, because I did it, and —"

"Yes, yes, darling, and so I do," interrupted the remorseful husband, hurriedly. And, to prove it, he ate the last scrap of the unappetizing concoction on his plate, which his wife said was a fish croquette. Afterwards still further to show his remorse, he helped her wash the dishes and set the rooms in order. Then together they went for a walk in the moonlight.

It was a beautiful walk, and it quite restored Helen to good nature. They went up on West Hill (where Helen particularly loved to go), and they laid wonderful plans of how one day they, too, would build a big stone palace of a home up there — though Burke did say that, for his part, he liked Elm Hill quite as well; but Helen laughed him out of that "old-fashioned idea." At least he said no more about it.

They talked much of how proud Burke's father was going to be when Burke had made good, and of how ashamed and sorry he would be that he had so misjudged his son's wife. And Helen uttered some very sweet and beautiful sentiments concerning her

intention of laying up no malice, her firm determination to be loving and forgiving.

Then together they walked home in the moonlight; and so thrilled and exalted were they that even the cheap little Dale Street living-room looked wonderfully dear. And Helen said that, after all, love was the only thing that mattered — that they just loved each other. And Burke said, "Yes, yes, indeed."

The vision of the sweet, daintily gowned wife and the perfect home was very clear to Helen as she dropped off to sleep that night; and she was sure that she could begin to realize it at once. But unfortunately she overslept the next morning — which was really Burke's fault, as she said, for he forgot to wind the alarm clock, and she was not used to getting up at such an unearthly hour, anyway, and she did not see why *he* had to do it, for that matter — he was really the son of the owner, even if he was *called* an apprentice.

This did not help matters any, for Burke never liked any reference to his position at the Works. To be sure, he did not say much, this time, except to observe stiffly that he *would* like his breakfast, if she would be so good as to get it — as if she were not already hurrying as fast as she could, and herself only half-dressed at that!

Of course the breakfast was a failure. Helen said that perhaps some people could get a meal of victuals on to the table, with a hungry man eyeing their every

move, but she could not. Burke declared then that he really did not want any breakfast anyway, and he started to go; but as Helen only cried the more at this, he had to come back and comfort her — thereby, in the end, being both breakfastless and late to his work.

Helen, after he had gone, spent a blissfully wretched ten minutes weeping over the sad fate that should doom such a child of light and laughter as herself to the somber rôle of martyr wife, and wondered if, after all, it would not be really more impressive and more soul-torturing-with-remorse for the cruel father-in-law, if she should take poison, or gas, or something (not disfiguring), and lay herself calmly down to die, her beautiful hands crossed meekly upon her bosom.

Attractive as was this picture in some respects, it yet had its drawbacks. Then, too, there was the laurel wreath of praise due her later. She had almost forgotten that. On the whole, that would be preferable to the poison, Helen decided, as she began, with really cheerful alacrity, to attack the messy breakfast dishes.

It was not alone the cooking that troubled the young wife during that first month of housekeeping. Everywhere she found pitfalls for her unwary feet, from managing the kitchen range to keeping the living-room dusted.

And there was the money.

Helen's idea of money, in her happy, care-free girl-

hood, had been that it was one of the common necessities of life; and she accepted it as she did the sunshine — something she was entitled to; something everybody had. She learned the fallacy of this, of course, when she attempted to earn her own living; but in marrying the son of the rich John Denby, she had expected to step back into the sunshine, as it were. It was not easy now to adjust herself to the change.

She did not like the idea of asking for every penny she spent, and it seemed as if she was always having to ask Burke for money; and, though he invariably handed it over with a nervously quick, "Why, yes, certainly! I don't mean you to have to ask for it, Helen"; yet she thought she detected a growing irritation in his manner each time. And on the last occasion he had added a dismayed "But I had n't any idea you could have got out so soon as this again!" And it made her feel very uncomfortable indeed.

As if *she* were to blame that it took so much butter and coffee and sugar and stuff just to get three meals a day! And as if it were her fault that that horrid cookbook was always calling for something she did not have, like mace, or summer savory, or thyme, and she had to run out and buy a pound of it! Did n't he suppose it took *some* money to stock up with things, when one had n't a thing to begin with?

Helen had been on the point of saying something of this sort to her husband, simply as a matter of

self-justification, when there unexpectedly came a most delightful solution of her difficulty.

It was the grocer who pointed the way.

"Why don't you open an account with us, Mrs. Denby?" he asked smilingly one day, in reply to her usual excuse that she could not buy something because she did not have the money to pay for it.

"An account? What's that? That would n't make me have any more money, would it? Father was always talking about accounts — good ones and bad ones. He kept a store, you know. But I never knew what they were, exactly. I never thought of asking. I never had to pay any attention to money at home. What is an account? How can I get one?"

"Why, you give your orders as usual, but let the payment go until the end of the month," smiled the grocer. "We'll charge it — note it down, you know — then send the bill to your husband."

"And I won't have to ask him for any money?"

"Not to pay us." The man's lips twitched a little.

"Oh, that would be just grand," she sighed longingly. "I'd like that. And it's something the way we're buying our furniture, is n't it? — installments, you know."

The grocer's lips twitched again.

"Er — y-yes, only we send a bill for the entire month."

"And he pays it? Oh, I see. That's just grand! And he'd like it all right, would n't he? — because of course he'd have to pay some time, anyhow. And

this way he would n't have to have me bothering him so much all the time asking for money. Oh, thank you. You're very kind. I think I will do that way if you don't mind."

"We shall be glad to have you, Mrs. Denby. So we'll call that settled. And now you can begin right away this morning."

"And can I get those canned peaches and pears and plums, and the grape jelly that I first looked at?"

"Certainly — if you decide you want 'em," mumbled the grocer, throwing the last six words as a sop to his conscience which was beginning to stir unpleasantly.

"Oh, yes, I want 'em," averred Helen, her eager eyes sweeping the alluringly laden shelves before her. "I wanted them all the time, you know, only I did n't have enough money to pay for them. Now it'll be all right because Burke'll pay — I mean, Mr. Denby," she corrected with a conscious blush, suddenly remembering what her husband had said the night before about her calling him "Burke" so much to strangers.

Helen found she wanted not only the fruits and jelly, but several other cans of soups, meats, and vegetables. And it was such a comfort, for once, to select what she wanted, and not have to count up the money in her purse! She was radiantly happy when she went home from market that morning (instead of being tired and worried as was usually the case); and the glow on her face lasted all through the

day and into the evening — so much so that even Burke must have noticed it, for he told her he did not know when he had seen her looking so pretty. And he gave her an extra kiss or two when he greeted her.

The second month of housekeeping proved to be a great improvement over the first. It was early in that month that Helen learned the joy and comfort of having "an account" at her grocer's. And she soon discovered that not yet had she probed this delight to its depths, for not only the grocer, but the fishman and the butcher were equally kind, and allowed her to open accounts with them. Coincident with this came the discovery that there were such institutions as bakeries and delicatessen shops, which seemed to have been designed especially to meet the needs of just such harassed little martyr housewives as she herself was; for in them one might buy bread and cakes and pies and even salads and cold meats, and fish balls. One might, indeed, with these delectable organizations at hand, snap one's fingers at all the cookbooks in the world — cookbooks that so miserably failed to cook!

The baker and the little Dutch delicatessen man, too (when they found out who she was), expressed themselves as delighted to open an account; and with the disagreeable necessity eliminated of paying on the spot for what one ordered, and with so great an assortment of ready-to-eat foods to select from, Helen found her meal-getting that second month a much simpler matter.

Then, too, Helen was much happier now that she did not have to ask her husband for money. She accepted what he gave her, and thanked him; but she said nothing about her new method of finance.

"I'm going to keep it secret till the stores send him the bills," said Helen to herself. "Then I'll show him what a lot I've saved from what he has given me, and he'll be so glad to pay things all at once without being bothered with my everlasting teasing!"

She only smiled, therefore, enigmatically, when he said one day, as he passed over the money: —

"Jove, girl! I quite forgot. You must be getting low. But I'm glad you did n't have to ask me for it, anyhow!"

Ask him for it, indeed! How pleased he would be when he found out that she was never going to ask him for money again!

Helen was meaning to be very economical these days. When she went to market she always saw several things she would have liked, that she did not get, for of course she wanted to make the bills as small as she could. Naturally Burke would wish her to do that. She tried to save, too, a good deal of the money Burke gave her; but that was not always possible, for there were her own personal expenses. True, she did not need many clothes — but she was able to pick up a few bargains in bows and collars (one always needed fresh neckwear, of course); and she found some lovely silk stockings, too, that were very cheap, so she bought several pairs — to save money. And

of course there were always car-fares and a soda now and then, or a little candy.

There were the "movies" too. She had fallen into the way of going rather frequently to the Empire with her neighbor on the same floor. It did her good, and got her out of herself. (She had read only recently how every wife should have some recreation; it was a duty she owed herself and her husband — to keep herself youthful and attractive.) She got lonesome and nervous, sitting at home all day; and now that she had systematized her housekeeping so beautifully by buying almost everything all cooked, she had plenty of leisure. Of course she would have preferred to go to the Olympia Theater. They had a stock company there, and real plays. But their cheapest seats were twenty-five cents, while she might go to the Empire for ten. So very bravely she put aside her expensive longings, and chose the better part — economy and the movies. Besides, Mrs. Jones, the neighbor on the same floor, said that, for her part, she liked the movies the best, — you got "such a powerful lot more for your dough."

Mrs. Jones always had something bright and original like that to say — Helen liked her very much! Indeed, she told Burke one day that Mrs. Jones was almost as good as a movie show herself. Burke, however, did not seem to care for Mrs. Jones. For that matter, he did not care for the movies, either.

No matter where Helen went in the afternoon, she was always very careful to be at home before Burke.

She hoped she knew what pertained to being a perfect wife better than to be careless about matters like that! Mrs. Jones was not always so particular in regard to her husband — which only served to give Helen a pleasant, warm little feeling of superiority at the difference.

Perhaps Mrs. Jones detected the superiority, for sometimes she laughed, and said: —

"All right, we'll go if you must; but you'll soon get over it. This lovey-dovey-I'm-right-here-hubby business is all very well for a while, but — you wait!"

"All right, I'm waiting. But — you see!" Helen always laughed back, bridling prettily.

Hurrying home from shopping or the theater, therefore, Helen always stopped and got her potato salad and cold meat, or whatever else she needed. And the meal was invariably on the table before Burke's key sounded in the lock.

Helen was, indeed, feeling quite as if she were beginning to realize her vision now. Was she not each night the loving, daintily gowned wife welcoming her husband to a well-ordered, attractive home? There was even quite frequently a bouquet of flowers on the dinner table. Somewhere she had read that flowers always added much to a meal; and since then she had bought them when she felt that she could afford them. And in the market there were almost always some cheap ones, only a little faded. Of course, she never bought the fresh, expensive ones.

After dinner there was the long evening together.

Sometimes they went to walk, after the dishes were done — Burke had learned to dry dishes beautifully. More often they stayed at home and played games, or read — Burke was always wanting to read. Sometimes they just talked, laying wonderful plans about the fine new house they were going to build. Now that Helen did not have to ask Burke for money, there did not seem to be so many occasions when he was fretful and nervous; and they were much happier together.

All things considered, therefore, Helen felt, indeed, before this second month of housekeeping was over, that she had now "got things nicely to running."

CHAPTER VI

THE HUSBAND

BURKE DENBY had never given any thought as to whether he were going to be a perfect husband or not. He had wanted to marry Helen, and he had married her. That was all there was to it, except, of course, that they had got to show his father that they could make good.

So far as being a husband — good, bad, or indifferent — was concerned, Burke was not giving any more thought to it now than he had given before his marriage. He was quite too busy giving thought to other matters — many other matters.

There was first his work. He hated it. He hated the noise, the smell, the grime, the overalls, the men he worked with, the smug superciliousness of his especial "boss." He felt abused and indignant that he had to endure it all. As if it were necessary to put him through such a course of sprouts as this! As if, when the time came, he could not run the business successfully without all these years of dirt and torture! Was an engineer, then, made to *build* an engine before he could be taught to handle the throttle? Was a child made to set the type of a primer before he could be taught his letters? Of course not! But they were making him not only set the type, but go down into the mines and dig the stuff the type was made of

before they would teach him his letters. Yet they pretended it all must be done if he would ever learn to read — that is, to run the Denby Iron Works. Bah! He had a mind to chuck it all. He would if it were n't for dad. Dad hated quitters. And dad was looking wretched enough, as it was.

And that was another thing — dad.

Undeniably Burke was very unhappy over his father. He did not like to think of him, yet his face was always before him, pale and drawn, as he had seen it at that first interview after his return. As the days passed, Burke, in spite of his wish not to see his father, found himself continually seizing every opportunity that might enable him to see him. Daily he found himself haunting doorways and corridors, quite out of his way, when there was a chance that his father might pass.

He told himself that it was just that he wanted to convince himself that his father did not look quite so bad, after all. But he knew in his heart that it was because he hoped his father would speak to him in the old way, and that it might lead to the tearing down of this horrible high wall of indifference and formality that had risen between them. Burke hated that wall.

The wall was there, however, always. Nothing ever came of these connivings and loiterings except (if it were during working hours) a terse hint from the foreman, perhaps, to get back on his job. How Burke hated that foreman!

And that was another thing — his position among

his fellow workmen. He was with them, but not of them. His being among them at all was plainly a huge joke — and when one is acting a tragedy in all seriousness, one does not like to hear chuckles as at a comedy. But, for that matter, Burke found the comedy element always present, wherever he went. The entire town took himself, his work, and his marriage as a huge joke — a subject for gay badinage, jocose slaps on the back, and gleeful cries of: —

"Well, Denby, how goes it? How doth the happy bridegroom?"

And Burke hated that, too.

It seemed to Burke, indeed, sometimes, that he hated everything but Helen. Helen, of course, was a dear — the sweetest little wife in the world. As if any one could help loving Helen! And however disagreeable the day, there was always Helen to go home to at night.

Oh, of course, he had to take that abominable flat along with Helen — naturally, as long as he could not afford to put her in a more expensive place. But that would soon be remedied — just as soon as he got a little ahead.

This "going home to Helen" had been one of Burke's happiest anticipations ever since his marriage. It would be so entrancing to find Helen and Helen's kiss waiting for him each night! Often had such thoughts been in his mind during his honeymoon trip; but never had they been so poignantly promising of joy as they were on that first day at the Works,

after his disheartening interview with his father. All the rest of that miserable day it seemed to Burke that the only thing he was living for was the going home to Helen that night.

"Home," to Burke, had always meant a place of peace and rest, of luxurious ease and noiseless servants, of orderly rooms and well-served meals, of mellow lights and softly blended colors. Unconsciously now home still meant the same, with the addition of Helen — Helen, the center of it all. It was this dear vision, therefore, that he treasured all through his honeymoon trip, that he hugged to himself all that wretched first day of work, and that was still his star of hope as he hurried that night toward the Dale Street flat. If he had stopped to think, he would have realized at once that this new home of a day was not the old home of years. But he did not stop to think of anything except that for the first time in his life he was going home from work to Helen, his wife.

Burke Denby never forgot the shock of that first home-going. He opened the door of his apartment — and confronted chaos: a surly janitor struggling with a curtain pole, a confusion of trunks, chairs, a stepladder, and a floor-pail, a disorder of dishes on a coverless table, a smell of burned milk, and a cross, tired, untidy wife who flung herself into his arms with a storm of sobs.

"Home," after that, meant quite something new to Burke Denby. It meant Helen, of course, but —

Still it would be only for a little while, after all, he consoled himself each day. Just as soon as he got ahead a little, it would be different. He could sell the stuff, then; and the very first thing to go would be that hideous purple pillow on the red plush sofa — for that matter, the sofa would follow after mighty quick. And the chairs, too. They were a little worse to sit on than to look at — which was unnecessary. As for the rugs — when it came to those, it would be his turn to select next time. At all events, he would not be obliged to have one that, the minute you opened the door, bounced into your face and screamed "Hullo! I'm here. See me!" How he hated that rug! And the pictures and those cheap gilt vases — everything, of course, would be different in the new home.

Nor did Burke stop to think that this constant shifting, in one's mind, of things that are, to things that may some time be, scarcely makes for content.

Still, Burke could not have forgotten his house-furnishings, even if he had tried to do so, for he had to make payments on them "every few minutes," as he termed it. Indeed, one of the unsolved riddles of his life these days was as to why there were so many more Mondays (the day he paid his installments) than there were Saturdays (the day the Works paid him) in a week. For that matter, after all was said and done, perhaps to nothing was Burke Denby giving more thought these days than to money.

Burke's experience with money heretofore had been to draw a check for what he wanted. True, he sometimes overdrew his account a trifle; but there was always his allowance coming the first of the month; and neither he nor the bank worried.

Now it was quite different. There was no allowance, and no bank — save his pocket, and there was only fifteen dollars a week coming into that. He would not have believed that fifteen dollars a week could go so quickly, and buy so little. Very early in the first month of housekeeping all that remained of his allowance was gone. What did not go at once to make payments on the furniture was paid over to Helen to satisfy some of her many requests for money.

And that was another of Burke's riddles —why Helen needed so much money just to get them something to eat. True, of late, she had not asked for it so frequently. She had not, indeed, asked for any for some time — for which he was devoutly thankful. He would not have liked to refuse her; and he certainly was giving her all that he could afford to give, without her asking. A fellow must smoke some — though Heaven knew he had cut his cigars down, both in quantity and quality, until he had cut out nearly all the pleasure!

Still he was glad to do it for Helen. Helen was a little brick. How pretty she looked when she was holding forth on his "making good," and her not "dragging" him "down"! Bless her heart! As if she

could be guilty of such a thing as that! Why, she was going to drag him up — Helen was!

And she was doing pretty well, too, running the little home, for a girl who did not know a thing about it, to begin with. She was doing a whole lot better than at first. Breakfast had not been late for two weeks, nor dinner, either. And she was almost always at the door to kiss him now, too, while at the first he had to hunt her up, only to find her crying in the kitchen, probably — something wrong somewhere.

Oh, to be sure, he *was* getting a little tired of potato salad, and he always had abhorred those potato-chippy things; and he himself did not care much for cold meat. But, of course, after she got a little more used to things she would n't serve that sort of trash quite so often. He would be getting real things to eat, pretty soon — good, juicy beefsteaks and roasts, and nice fresh vegetables and fruit shortcakes, with muffins and griddle-cakes for breakfast. But Helen was a little brick — Helen was. And she was doing splendidly!

CHAPTER VII

STUMBLING-BLOCKS

Mrs. Burke Denby was a little surprised at the number of letters directed to her husband in the morning mail that first day of November, until she noticed the familiar names in the upper left-hand corners of several of the envelopes.

"Oh, it's the bills," she murmured, drawing in her breath a little uncertainly. "To-day's the first, and they said they'd send them then. But I did n't think there'd be such a lot of them. Still, I've had things at all those places. Well, anyway, he'll be glad to pay them all at once, without my teasing for money all the time," she finished with resolute insistence, as she turned back to her work.

If, now that the time had come, and the bills lay before her in all their fearsome reality, Helen was beginning to doubt the wisdom of her financial system, she would not admit it, even to herself. And she still wore a determinedly cheerful face when her husband came home to dinner that night. She went into the kitchen as he began to open his mail — she was reminded of a sudden something that needed her attention. Two minutes later she nearly dropped the dish of potato salad she was carrying, at the sound of his voice from the doorway.

"Helen, what in Heaven's name is the meaning of

these bills?" He was in the kitchen now, holding out a sheaf of tightly clutched papers in each hand.

Helen set the potato salad down hastily.

"Why, Burke, don't — don't look at me so!"

"But what does this mean? What are these things?"

"Why, they — they're just bills, I suppose. They *said* they'd be."

"Bills! Great Cæsar, Helen! You don't mean to say that you *do* know about them — that you bought all this stuff?"

Helen's lip began to quiver.

"Burke, don't — please don't look like that. You frighten me."

"Frighten you! What do you think of *me?* — springing a thing like this!"

"Why, Burke, I — I thought you'd *like* it."

"*Like it!*"

"Y-yes — that I did n't have to ask you for money all the time. And you'd have to p-pay 'em some time, anyhow. We had to eat, you know."

"But, great Scott, Helen! We are n't a hotel! Look at that — 'salad' — 'salad' — 'salad,'" he exploded, pointing a shaking finger at a series of items on the uppermost bill in his left hand. "There's tons of the stuff there, and I always did abominate it!"

"Why, Burke, I — I —" And the floods came.

"Oh, thunderation! Helen, Helen, don't — please don't!"

"But I thought I was going to p-please you, and you called me a h-hotel, and said you a-abominated it!" she wailed, stumbling away blindly.

With a despairing ejaculation Burke flung the bills to the floor, and caught the sob-shaken little figure of his wife in his arms.

"There, there, I was a brute, and I did n't mean it — not a word of it. Sweetheart, don't, please don't," he begged. "Why, girlie, all the bills in Christendom are n't worth a tear from your dear eyes. Come, *won't* you stop?"

But Helen did not stop, at once. The storm was short, but tempestuous. At the end of ten minutes, however, together they went into the dining-room. Helen carried the potato salad (which Burke declared he was really hungry for to-day), and Burke carried the bills crumpled in one hand behind his back, his other arm around his wife's waist.

That evening a remorseful, wistful-eyed wife and a husband with an "I'll-be-patient-if-it-kills-me" air went over the subject of household finances, and came to an understanding.

There were to be no more charge accounts. For the weekly expenses Helen was to have every cent that could possibly be spared; but what she could not pay cash for, they must go without, if they starved. In a pretty little book she must put down on one side the money received. On the other, the money spent. She was a dear, good little wife, and he loved her 'most to death; but he could n't let her run up bills

when he had not a red cent to pay them with. He would borrow, of course, for these — he was not going to have any dirty little tradesmen pestering him with bills all the time! But this must be the last. Never again!

And Helen said yes, yes, indeed. And she was very sure she would love to keep the pretty little book, and put down all the money she got, and all she spent.

All this was very well in theory. But in practice —

At the end of the first week Helen brought her book to her husband, and spread it open before him with great gusto.

On the one side were several entries of small sums, amounting to eight dollars received. On the other side were the words: "Spent all but seventeen cents."

"Oh, but you should put down what you spent it for," corrected Burke, with a merry laugh.

"Why?"

"Why, er — so you can see — er — what the money goes for."

"What's the difference — if it goes?"

"Oh, shucks! You can't keep a cash account that way! You have to put 'em both down, and then — er — balance up and see if your cash comes right. See, like this," he cried, taking a little book from his pocket. "I'm keeping one." And he pointed to a little list which read: —

Lunch	$ .25
Cigar	.10
Car-fare	.10
Paper	.02
Helen	2.00
Cigars	.25
Paper	.02

"Now that's what I spent yesterday. You want to put yours down like that, then add 'em up and subtract it from what you receive. What's left should equal your cash on hand."

"Hm-m; well, all right," assented Helen dubiously, as she picked up her own little book.

Helen looked still more dubious when she presented her book for inspection the next week.

"I don't think I like it this way," she announced, with a pout.

"Why not?"

"Why, Burke, the mean old thing steals — actually steals! It says I ought to have one dollar and forty-five cents; and I have n't got but fourteen cents! It's got it itself — somewhere!"

"Ho, that's easy, dear!" The man gave an indulgent laugh. "You did n't put 'em all down — what you spent."

"But I did — everything I could remember. Besides, I borrowed fifty cents of Mrs. Jones. I did n't put that down anywhere. I did n't know where to put it."

"Helen! You borrowed money — of that woman?"

"She is n't 'that woman'! She's my friend, and I like her," flared Helen, hotly. "I had to have some eggs, and I did n't have a cent of money. I shall pay her back, of course, — next time you pay me."

Burke frowned.

"Oh, come, come, Helen, this will never do," he remonstrated. "Of course you'll pay her back; but I can't have my wife borrowing of the neighbors!"

"But I had to! I had to have some eggs," she choked, "and —"

"Yes, yes, I know. But I mean, we won't again," interrupted the man desperately, fleeing to cover in the face of the threatening storm of sobs. "And, anyhow, we'll see that you have some money now," he cried gayly, plunging his hands into his pockets, and pulling out all the bills and change he had. "There, 'with all my worldly goods I thee endow,' " he laughed, lifting his hands above her bright head, and showering the money all over her.

Like children then they scrambled for the rolling nickels and elusive dimes; and in the ensuing frolic the tiresome account-book was forgotten — which was exactly what Burke had hoped would happen.

This was the second week. At the end of the third, the "mean old thing" was in a worse muddle than ever, according to Helen; and, for her part, she would rather never buy anything at all if she had got to go and tell that nuisance of a book every time!

The fourth Saturday night Helen did not produce the book at all.

"Oh, I don't keep that any longer," she announced, with airy nonchalance, in answer to Burke's question. "It never came right, and I hated it, anyhow. So what's the use? I've got what I've got, and I've spent what I've spent. So what's the difference?" And Burke, after a feeble remonstrance, gave it up as a bad job. Incidentally it might be mentioned that Burke was having a little difficulty with his own cash account, and was tempted to accuse his own book of stealing — else where did the money go?

It was the next Monday night that Burke came home with a radiant countenance.

"Gleason's here — up at the Hancock House. He's coming down after dinner."

"Who's Gleason?"

Helen's tone was a little fretful — there was a new, intangible something in her husband's voice that Helen did not understand, and that she did not think she liked.

"Gleason! Who's Doc Gleason!" exclaimed Burke, with widening eyes. "Oh, I forgot. You don't know him, do you?" he added, with a slight frown. Burke Denby was always forgetting that Helen knew nothing of his friends or of himself until less than a year before. "Well, Doc Gleason is the best ever. He went to Egypt with us last year, and to Alaska the year before."

"How old is he?"

"Old? Why, I don't know — thirty — maybe more. He must be a little more, come to think of it.

But you never think of age with the doctor. He'll be young when he's ninety."

"And you like him — so well?" Her voice was a little wistful.

"Next to dad — always have. You'll like him, too. You can't help it. He's mighty interesting."

"And he's a doctor?"

"Yes, and no. Oh, he graduated and hung out his shingle; but he never practiced much. He had money enough, anyway, and he got interested in scientific research — antiquarian, mostly, though he's done a bit of mountain-climbing and glacier-studying for the National Geographic Society."

"Antiquarian? Oh, yes, I know — old things. Mother was that way, too. She had an old pewter plate, and a dark blue china teapot, homely as a hedge fence, I thought, but she doted on 'em. And she doted on ancestors, too. She had one in that old ship — Mayflower, was n't it?"

Burke laughed.

"Mayflower! My dear child, the Mayflower is a mere infant-in-arms in the doctor's estimation. The doctor goes back to prehistoric times for his playground, and to the men of the old Stone Age for his preferred playmates."

"Older than the Mayflower, then?"

"A trifle — some thousands of years."

"Goodness! How can he? I thought the Mayflower was bad enough. But what does he do — collect things?"

"Yes, to some extent; he has a fine collection of Babylonian tablets, and —"

"Oh, I know — those funny little brown and yellow cakes like soap, all cut into with pointed little marks — what do you call it? — like your father has in his library!"

"The cuneiform writing? Yes. As I said, the doctor has a fine collection of tablets, and of some other things; but principally he studies and goes on trips. It was a trip to the Spanish grottoes that got him interested in the archæological business in the first place, and put him out of conceit with doctoring. He goes a lot now, sometimes independently, sometimes in the interest of some society. He does in a scientific way what dad and I have done for fun — traveling and collecting, I mean. Then, too, he has written a book or two which are really authoritative in their line. He's a great chap — the doctor is. Wait till you see him. I've told him about you, too."

"Then you told him — that is — he knows — about the marriage."

"Why, sure he does!" Burke's manner was a bit impatient. "What do you suppose, when he's coming here to-night? Now, mind, put on your prettiest frock and your sweetest smile. I want him to see *why* I married you," he challenged banteringly. "I want him to see what a treasure I've got. And say, dearie, *do* you suppose — *could* we have him to dinner, or something? Could you manage it? I wanted

to ask him to-night; but of course I could n't — without your knowing beforehand."

"Mercy, no, Burke!" shuddered the young housekeeper. "Don't you dare — when I don't know it."

"But if you do know it —" He paused hopefully.

"Why, y-yes, I guess so. Of course I could get things I was sure of, like potato salad and —"

Burke sat back in his chair.

"But, Helen, I'm afraid — I don't think — that is, I'm 'most sure Gleason does n't like potato salad," he stammered.

"Does n't he? Well, he need n't eat it, then. We'll have all the more left for the next day."

"But, Helen, er —"

"Oh, I'll have chips, too; don't worry, dear. I'll give him something to eat," she promised gayly. "Do you suppose I'm going to have one of your swell friends come here, and then have you ashamed of me? You just wait and see!"

"Er, no — no, indeed, of course not," plunged in her husband feverishly, trying to ward off a repetition of the "swell" — a word he particularly abhorred.

Several times in the last two months he had heard Helen use this word — twice when she had informed him with great glee that some swell friends of his from Elm Hill had come in their carriage to call; and again quite often when together on the street they met some one whom he knew. He thought he hated the word a little more bitterly every time he heard it.

For several weeks now the Denbys had been receiving calls — Burke Denby was a Denby of Denby Mansion even though he was temporarily marooned on Dale Street at a salary of sixty dollars a month. Besides, to many, Dale Street and the sixty dollars, with the contributory elements of elopement and irate parent, only added piquancy and interest to what would otherwise have been nothing but the conventional duty call.

To Helen, in the main, these calls were a welcome diversion — "just grand," indeed. To Burke, on whom the curiosity element was not lost, they were an impertinence and a nuisance. Yet he endured them, and even welcomed them, in a way; for he wanted Helen to know his friends, and to like them — better than she liked Mrs. Jones. He did not care for Mrs. Jones. She talked too loud, and used too much slang. He did not like to have Helen with her. Always, therefore, after callers had been there, his first eager question was: "How did you like them, dear?" He wanted so much that Helen should like them!

To-night, however, in thinking of the prospective visit from Gleason, he was wondering how the doctor would like Helen — not how Helen would like the doctor. The change was significant but unconscious — perhaps all the more significant because it was unconscious.

Until he had reached home that night, Burke had been so overjoyed at the prospect of an old-time chat with his friend that he had given little thought to

Gleason's probable opinion of the Dale Street flat and its furnishings. Now, with his eyes on the obtrusive unharmony all about him, and his memory going back to the doctor's well-known fastidiousness of taste, he could think of little else. He did hope Gleason would not think *he* had selected those horrors! Of course he had already explained — a little — about his father's disapproval of the marriage, and the resulting cutting-off of his allowance; but even that would not excuse (to Gleason) the riot of glaring reds and pinks and purples in his living-rooms; and one could not very well explain that one's wife *liked* the horrors — He pulled himself up sharply. Of course Helen herself was a dear. He hoped Gleason would see how dear she was. He wanted Gleason to like Helen.

As the hour drew near for the expected guest's arrival, Burke Denby, greatly to his vexation, found himself growing more and more nervous. He asked himself indignantly if he were going to let a purple cushion entirely spoil the pleasure of the evening. Not until he had seen Gleason that afternoon had he realized how sorely he had missed his father's companionship all these past weeks. Not until he had found himself bubbling over with the things he wanted to talk about that evening had he realized how keenly he had missed the mental stimulus of that father's comradeship. And now, for the sake of a purple cushion, was he to lose the only chance he had had for weeks of conversing with an intelligent —

With an almost audible gasp the shocked and shamed husband pulled himself up again.

Well, of course Helen was intelligent. It was only that she was not interested in, and did not know about, these things he was thinking of; and —

The doorbell rang sharply, and Burke leaped to his feet and hastened to press the button that would release the catch of the lock at the entrance below.

"Why, Burke, you never called down through the tube at all, and asked who it was," remonstrated Helen, hurrying in, her fingers busy with the final fastenings of her dress.

"You bet your life I did n't," laughed Burke, a bit grimly. "You've got another guess coming if you think I'm going to hold Doc Gleason off at the end of a 'Who is it?' bellowed into his ear from that impertinent copper trumpet down there."

"Why, Burke, that's all right. Everybody does it," maintained Helen. "We have to, else we'd be letting all sorts of folks in, and —"

At a warning gesture from her husband she stopped just as a tall, smooth-shaven man with kind eyes and a grave smile appeared at the open hallway door.

"Glad to see you, doctor," cried Burke, extending a cordial hand, that yet trembled a little. "Let me present you to my wife."

"Pleased to meet you, I'm sure," bobbed Helen. And because she was nervous she said the next thing that came into her head. "And I hope you're pleased

to meet me, too. All Burke's friends are so swell, you know, that —"

"Er — ah — " broke in the dismayed husband.

But the visitor advanced quietly, still with that same grave smile, and clasped Mrs. Denby's extended hand.

"I am very sure Burke's friends are, indeed, very glad to meet you," he said. "Certainly I am," he finished, with a cordial heartiness so nicely balanced that even Burke Denby's sensitive alertness could find in it neither the overzealousness of insincerity nor the indifference of disdain.

Even when, a minute later, they turned and went into the living room, Burke's still apprehensive watchfulness could detect in his friend's face not one trace of the dismayed horror he had been dreading to see there.

"Gleason's a brick," he sighed to himself, trying to relax his tense muscles. "As if I did n't know that every last gimcrack in this miserable room would fairly scream at him the moment he entered that door!"

In spite of everybody's very evident efforts to have everything pass off pleasantly, the evening was anything but a success. Helen, at first shy and ill at ease, said little. Then, as if suddenly realizing her deficiencies as a hostess, she tried to remedy it by talking very loud and very fast about anything that came into her mind, reveling especially in minute details concerning their own daily lives, ranging all

the way from stories of the elopement and the house-furnishing on the installment plan to hilarious accounts of her experiences with the cookbook and the account-book.

Very plainly Helen was doing her best to "show off." From one to the other she looked, with little nods and coquettish smiles.

To Gleason her manner said: "You see now why Burke fell in love with me, don't you?" To Burke it said: "There, now I guess you ain't ashamed of me!"

The doctor, still with the grave smile and kindly eyes, listened politely, uttering now and then a pleasant word or two, in a way that even the distraught husband could not criticize. As for the husband himself, between his anger at Helen and his anger at himself because of his anger at Helen, he was in a woeful condition of nervousness and ill-humor. Vainly trying to wrest the ball of conversation from Helen's bungling fingers, he yet felt obliged to laugh in apparent approval at her wild throws. Nor was he unaware of the sorry figure he thus made of himself. Having long since given up all hope of the anticipated chat with his friend, his one aim now was to get the visit over, and the doctor out of the house as soon as possible. Yet the very fact that he did want the visit over and the doctor gone only angered him the more, and put into his mouth words that were a mockery of cordiality. No wonder, then, that for Burke the evening was a series of fidgetings, throat-clearings,

and nervous laughs that (if he had but known it) were fully as distressing to the doctor as they were to himself.

At half-past nine the doctor rose to his feet.

"Well, good people, I must go," he announced cheerily. (For the last half-hour the doctor had been wondering just how soon he might make that statement.) "It's half-past nine."

"Pshaw! That ain't late," protested Helen.

"No, indeed," echoed Burke — though Burke had promptly risen with his guest.

"Perhaps not, to you; but to me —" The doctor let a smile finish his sentence.

"But you're coming again," gurgled Helen. "You're coming to dinner. Burke said you was."

Burke's mouth flew open — but just in time he snapped it shut. He had remembered that hospitable husbands do not usually retract their wives' invitations with a terrified "For Heaven's sake, no!" — at least, not in the face of the prospective guest. Before he could put the new, proper words into his mouth, the doctor spoke.

"Thank you. You're very kind; but I'm afraid not — this time, Mrs. Denby. My stay is to be very short. But I'm glad to have had this little visit," he finished, holding out his hand.

And again Burke, neither then, nor when he looked straight into the doctor's eyes a moment later, could find aught in word or manner upon which to pin his watchful suspicions.

The next moment the doctor was gone.

Helen yawned luxuriously, openly — Helen never troubled to hide her yawns.

"Now I like *him*," she observed emphatically, but not very distinctly (owing to the yawn). "If all your swell friends were —"

"Helen, for Heaven's sake, *is n't* there any word but that abominable 'swell' that you can use?" interrupted her husband, seizing the first pretext that offered itself as a scapegoat for his irritation.

Helen laughed and shrugged her shoulders.

"All right; 'stuck up,' then, if you like that better. But, for my part, I like 'swell' best. It's so expressive, so much more swell — there, you see," she laughed, with another shrug; "it just says itself. But, really, I do like the doctor. I think he's just grand. Where does he live?"

"Boston." Burke hated "grand" only one degree less than "swell."

"Is he married?"

"No."

"How old did you say he was?"

"I did n't say. I don't know, Thirty-five, probably."

"Why, Burke, what's the matter? What are you so short about? Don't you *like* it that I like him? I thought you wanted me to like your friends."

"Yes, yes, I know; and I do, Helen, of course." Burke got to his feet and took a nervous turn about the tiny room.

Helen watched him with widening eyes. The look of indolent satisfaction was gone from her face. She was not yawning now.

"Why, Burke, what *is* the matter?" she catechized. "Was n't I nice to him? Did n't I talk to him, and just lay myself out to entertain him? Did n't I ask him to dinner, and —"

"Dinner!" Burke fairly snarled the word out as he wheeled sharply. "Holy smoke, Helen! I wonder if you think I'd have that man come here to dinner, or come here ever again to hear you — Oh, hang it all, what am I saying?" he broke off, jerking himself about with a despairing gesture.

Helen came now to her feet. Her eyes blazed.

"I know. You was ashamed of me," she panted.

"Oh, come, come; nonsense, Helen!"

"You was."

"Of course I was n't."

"Then what was the matter?"

"Nothing; nothing, Helen."

"There was, too. Don't you suppose I know? But I tried to do all right. I tried to make you p-proud of me," she choked. "I know I did n't talk much at first. I was scared and stupid, he was so fine and grand. And I did n't know a thing about all that Egyptian stuff you was talking about. Then I thought how 'shamed you'd be of me, and I just made up my mind I *would* talk and show him it was n't a — a little fool that you'd married; and I s'posed I was doing what you wanted me to. But

I see now I was n't. I was n't fine enough for your grand friend. I ain't never fine enough for 'em. But I don't care. I hate 'em all — every one of 'em! I'd rather have Mrs. Jones twice over. *She* is n't ashamed of me. I thought I was p-pleasing you; and now — now —" Her words were lost in a storm of sobs.

There was but one thing to be done, of course; and Burke did it. He took her in his arms and soothed and petted and praised her. What he said he did not know — nor care, for that matter, so long as it served ever so slightly to dam the flood of Helen's tears. That, for the moment, was the only thing worth living for. The storm passed at last, as storms must; but it was still a teary little wife that received her husband's good-night kiss some time later.

Burke did not go to sleep very readily that night. In his mind he was going over his prospective meeting with his friend Gleason the next day.

What would Gleason say? How would he act? What would he himself say? What *could* he say? He could not very well apologize for —

Even to himself Burke would not finish the sentence.

Apologize? Indeed, no! As if there were anything, anyway, to apologize for! He would meet Gleason exactly as usual. He would carry his head high. There should be about him no air of apology or appeal. By his every act and word he would show that he was not in need of sympathy, and that he should

resent comment. He might even ask Gleason to dinner. He believed he *would* ask him to dinner. In no other way, certainly, could he so convincingly show how — er — proud he was of his wife.

Burke went to sleep then.

It had been arranged that the two men should meet at noon for luncheon; and promptly on time Burke appeared at the hotel. His chin was indeed high, and for the first two minutes he was painfully guarded and self-conscious in his bearing. But under the unstudied naturalness of the doctor's manner, he speedily became his normal self; and in five minutes the two were conversing with their old ease and enthusiasm.

The doctor had with him an Egyptian scarab with a rarely interesting inscription, a new acquisition; also a tiny Babylonian tablet of great value. In both of them Burke was much interested. In the wake then of a five-thousand-year-old stylus, it is not strange that he forgot present problems.

"I'm taking these up to-night for your father to see," smiled the doctor, after a short silence. "He writes me he's got a new tablet himself; a very old one. He thinks he's made a discovery on it, too. He swears he's picked out a veritable thumb-mark on one side."

"Nonsense! Dad's always discovering things," grinned Burke. "You know dad."

"But he says this is a sure thing. It's visible with the naked eye; but under the microscope it's won-

derful. And — But, never mind! We'll see for ourselves to-night. You're coming up, of course."

"Sure! And I want to see —" The young man stopped abruptly. A painful color had swept to his forehead. "Er — no. On second thoughts I — I can't to-night," he corrected. In its resolute emphasis his voice sounded almost harsh. "But you — you're coming to dinner with us — to-morrow night, are n't you?"

"Oh, no; no, thank you," began the doctor hastily. Then, suddenly, he encountered his friend's steadfast eye upon him. "Er — that is," he amended in his turn, "unless you — you are willing to let me come very informally, as I shall have to leave almost at once afterwards. I'm taking the eight-thirty train that evening."

"Very good. We shall expect you," answered the younger man, with a curious relaxation of voice and manner — a relaxation that puzzled and slightly worried the doctor, who was wondering whether it were the relaxation of relief or despair. The doctor was not sure yet that he had rightly interpreted that steadfast gaze. Two minutes later, Burke, once again self-conscious, constrained, and with his head high, took his leave.

On his way back to work Burke berated himself soundly. Having deliberately bound himself to the martyrdom of a dinner to his friend, he was now insufferably angry that he should regard it as a martyrdom at all. Also he knew within himself that

there seemed, for the moment, nothing that he would not give to spend the coming evening in the quiet restfulness of his father's library with the doctor and an Egyptian scarab.

As if all the Egyptian scarabs and Babylonian tablets in the world *could* balance the scale with Helen on the other side!

CHAPTER VIII

DIVERGING WAYS

Of course the inevitable happened. However near two roads may be at the start, if they diverge ever so slightly and keep straight ahead, there is bound to be in time all the world between them.

In the case of Burke and Helen, their roads never started together at all: they merely crossed; and at the crossing came the wedding. They were miles apart at the start — miles apart in tastes, traditions, and environment. In one respect only were they alike: undisciplined self-indulgence — a likeness that meant only added differences when it came to the crossing; and that made it all the more nearly impossible to merge those two diverging roads into one wide way leading straight on to wedded happiness.

All his life Burke had consulted no one's will but his own. It was not easy now to walk when he wanted to sit still, nor to talk when he wanted to read; especially as the one who wanted him to walk and to talk happened to be a willful young person who all *her* life had been in the habit of walking and talking when *she* wanted to.

Burke, accustomed from babyhood to leaving his belongings wherever he happened to drop them, was first surprised and then angry that he did not find

them magically restored to their proper places, as in the days of his boyhood and youth. Burke abhorred disorder. Helen, accustomed from her babyhood to being picked-up after, easily drifted into the way of letting all things, both hers and his, lie as they were. It saved a great deal of work.

Even so simple a matter as the temperature of a sleeping-room had its difficulties. Burke liked air. He wanted the windows wide open. Helen, trained to think night air was damp and dangerous, wanted them shut. And when two people are sleepy, cross, and tired, it is appalling what a range of woe can lie in the mere opening and shutting of a window.

Burke was surprised, annoyed, and dismayed. Being unaccustomed to disappointments he did not know how to take them gracefully. This being married was not proving to be at all the sort of thing he had pictured to himself. He had supposed that life, married life, was to be a new wonder every day; an increasing delight every hour. It was neither. Living now was a matter of never-ending adjustment, self-sacrifice, and economy. And he hated them all. In spite of himself he was getting into debt, and he hated debt. It made a fellow feel cheap and mean.

Even Helen was not what he had thought she was. He was ashamed to own it, even to himself, but there was a good deal about Helen that he did not like. She was not careful about her appearance. She was actually almost untidy at times. He hated those loose, sloppy things she sometimes wore, and he

abominated those curl-paper things in her hair. She was willful and fretful, and she certainly did not know how to give a fellow a decent meal or a comfortable place to stay. For his part, he did not think a girl had any right to marry until she knew something about running a simple home.

Then there was her constant chatter. Was she not ever going to talk about anything but the silly little everyday happenings of her work? A fellow wanted to hear something, when he came home tired at night, besides complaints that the range did n't work, or that the grocer forgot his order, or that the money was out.

Why, Helen used to be good company, cheerful, often witty. Where were her old-time sparkle and radiance? Her talk now was a meaningless chatter of trivial things, or an irritating, wailing complaint of everything under the sun, chiefly revolving around the point of "how different everything was" from what she expected. Great Scott! As if *he* had not found some things different! *That* evidently was what marriage was — different. But talking about it all the time did not help any.

Could n't she read? But, then, if she did read, it would be only the newspaper account of the latest murder; and then she would want to talk about that. She never read anything worth while.

And it was for this, this being married to Helen, that he had given up so much: dad, his home, everything. She did n't appreciate it — Helen did n't.

She did not rightly estimate what he was being made to suffer.

That there was any especial meaning in all this that he himself should take to heart — that there was any course open to him but righteous discontent and rebellion — never occurred to Burke. His training of frosted cakes and toy shotguns had taught him nothing of the traditional "two bears," "bear" and "forbear." The marriage ceremony had not meant to him "to be patient, tender, and sympathetic." It had meant the "I will" of self-assertion, not the "I will" of self-discipline. That Helen ought to change many of *her* traits and habits he was convinced. That there might be some in himself that needed changing, or that the mere fact of his having married Helen might have entailed upon himself certain obligations as to making the best of what he had deliberately chosen, did not once occur to him.

As for Helen — Helen was facing her own disillusions. She was not trying now to be the daintily gowned wife welcoming her husband to a well-kept home. She had long since decided that that was impossible — on sixty dollars a month. She was tired of being a martyr wife. Even the laurel wreath of praise had lost its allurement: she would not get it, probably, even if she earned it; and, anyway, she would be dead from trying to get it. And for her part she would rather have some fun while she was living.

But she was n't having any fun. Things were so different. Everything was different. She had not supposed being married was like this: one long grind of housework from morning till night, and for a man who did not care. And Burke did not care — now. Once, the first thing he wanted when he came into the house was a kiss and a word from her. Now he wanted his dinner. And he was so fussy, too! *She* could get along with cold things; but he wanted hot ones, and lots of them. And he always wanted finger-bowls and lots of spoons, and everything fixed just so on the table, too. He said it was n't that he wanted "style." It was just that he wanted things decent. As if she had n't had things decent herself — and without all that fuss and clutter!

After dinner he never wanted to talk now, or to go to walk. He just wanted to read or study. He *said* he was studying; something about his work. As if once he would have cared more for any old work than for her!

And she was so lonely! There was nobody now for her to be with. Mrs. Jones had moved away, and there were never any callers now. She had returned every one of the calls she had had from Burke's fine friends. She had put on her new red dress and her best hat with the pink roses; and she had tried to be just as bright and entertaining as she knew how to be. But they never came again, so of course she could not go to see them. She *had* gone, once or twice. But Burke said she must not do that. It

was not proper to return your own calls. If they wanted to see her they would come themselves. But they never came. Probably, anyhow, they did not want to see her; and that was the trouble. Not that she cared! They were a "stuck-up" lot, anyway; and she was just as good as they were. She had told one woman so, once — the woman that carried her eyeglasses on the end of a little stick and stared. That woman always had made her mad. So it was just as well, perhaps, that they did not come any more, after all. Burke was ashamed of her, anyway, when they did come. She knew that. He did not like anything she did nowadays. He was always telling her he did wish she would stop saying "you was," or holding her fork like that, or making so much noise eating soup, and a dozen other things. As if nobody in the house had a right to do anything but *his* way!

It had been so different at home! There everything she did was just right. And she was never lonely. There were the parties and the frolics and the sleigh-rides, and the girls running in all the time, and the boys every evening on the porch, or in the parlor, or taking her buggy-riding. Nothing there was ever complete without her. While here — Well, who supposed being married meant working like a slave all day, and being cooped up all the evening with a man whose nose was buried in a book, and who scarcely spoke to you!

And there was the money. Burke acted, for all the world, as if he thought she ate money, and ate

it whether she was hungry or not, just to spite him. As if she did n't squeeze every penny till it fairly shrieked, now; and as if anybody could make ten dollars a week go further than she did! To be sure, at first she had been silly and extravagant, running up bills, and borrowing of Mrs. Jones, as she did. And of course she was a little unreasonable and childish about keeping that account-book. But that was only at the first, when she was quite ignorant and inexperienced. It was very different now. She kept a cash account, and most of the time it came right. How she wished she had an allowance, though! But Burke utterly refused to give her that. Said she'd be extravagant and spend it all the first day. As if she had not learned better than that by bitter experience! And as if anything could be worse than the way they were trying to get along now, with her teasing for money all the time, and him insisting on seeing the bills, and then asking how they *could* manage to eat so many eggs, and saying he should think she used butter to oil the floors with. He did n't see how it could go so fast any other way!

And was n't he always telling her she did not manage right? And did n't he give her particular fits one day and an awful lecture on wastefulness, just because he happened to find half a loaf of mouldy bread in the jar? Just as if *he* did n't spend something — and a good big something, too! — on all those cigars he smoked. Yet he flew into fits over a bit of mouldy bread of *hers*.

To be sure, when she cried, he called himself a brute, and said he did n't mean it, and it was only because he hated so to have her pinching and saving all the time that it made him mad — raving mad. Just as if she was to blame that they did not have any money!

But she was to blame, of course, in a way. If it had not been for her, he would be living at home with all the money he wanted. Sometimes it came to her with sickening force that maybe Burke was thinking that, too. Was he? Could it be that he was sorry he had married her? Very well — her chin came up proudly. He need not stay if he did not want to. He could go. But — the chin was not so high, now — he was all there was. She had nobody but Burke now. *Could* it be —

She believed she would ask Dr. Gleason some time. She liked the doctor. He had been there several times now, and she felt real well acquainted with him. Perhaps he would know. But, after all, she was not going to worry. She did not believe that really Burke wished he had not married her. It was only that he was tired and fretted with his work. It would be better by and by, when he had got ahead a little. And of course he would get ahead. They would not always have to live like this!

It was in March that Burke came home to dinner one evening with a radiant face, yet with an air of worried excitement.

"It's dad. He's sent for me," he explained, in answer to his wife's questions.

"Sent for you!"

"Yes. He is n't very well, Brett says. He wants to see me."

"Humph! After all this time! I would n't go a step if I was you."

"Helen! Not go to my father?"

Helen quaked a little under the fire in her husband's eyes; but she held her ground.

"I don't care. He's treated you like dirt. You know he has."

"I know he's sick and has sent for me. And I know I'm going to him. That's enough for me to know — at present," retorted the man, getting to his feet, and leaving his dinner almost untasted.

Half an hour later he appeared before her, freshly shaved, and in the radiant good humor that seems to follow a bath and fresh garments as a natural consequence. "Come, chicken, give us a kiss," he cried gayly; "and don't sit up for me: I may be late."

"My, but ain't we fixed up!" pouted Helen jealously. "I should think you was going to see your best girl."

"I am," laughed Burke boyishly. "Dad was my best girl — till I got you. Good-bye! I'm off."

"Good-bye." Helen's lips still pouted, and her eyes burned somberly as she sat back in her chair.

Outside the house Burke drew a long breath, and yet a longer one. It seemed as if he could not inhale

deeply enough the crisp, bracing air. Then, with an eager stride that would cover the distance in little more than half the usual time, he set off toward Elm Hill. There was only joyous anticipation in his face now. The worry was all gone. After all, had not Brett said that this illness of dad's was nothing serious?

For a week Burke had known that something was wrong — that his father was not at the Works. In vain had he haunted office doors and corridors for a glimspe of a face that never appeared. Then had come the news that John Denby was ill. A paralyzing fear clutched the son's heart.

Was this to be the end, then? Was dad to — die, and never to know, never to read his boy's heart? Was this the end of all hopes of some day seeing the old look of love and pride in his father's eyes? Then it would, indeed, be the end of — everything, if dad died; for what was the use of struggling, of straining every nerve to make good, if dad was not to be there to — know?

It had been at this point that Burke, in spite of his hurt pride, and of his very lively doubts as to the cordiality of his reception, had almost determined to go himself to the old home and demand to see his father. Then, just in time, had come Brett's wonderful message that his father wished to see him, and that he was not, after all, fatally or even seriously ill.

Dad was not going to die, then; and dad wished to see him — *wished* to see him!

Burke drew in his breath now again, and bounded up the great stone steps of Denby Mansion, two at a time. The next minute, for the first time since his marriage the summer before, he stood in the wide, familiar hallway.

Benton, the old butler, took his hat and coat; and the way he took them had in it all the flattering deference of the well-trained servant, and the rapturous joy of the head of a house welcoming a dear wanderer home.

Burke looked into the beaming old face and shining eyes — and swallowed hard before he could utter an unsteady "How are you, Benton?"

"I'm very well, sir, thank you, sir. And it's glad I am to see you, Master Burke. This way, please. The master's in the library, sir."

Unconsciously Burke Denby lifted his chin. A long-lost something seemed to have come back to him. He could not himself have defined it; and he certainly could not have told why, at that moment, he should suddenly have thought of the supercilious face of his hated "boss" at the Works.

Behind Benton's noiseless steps Burke's feet sank into luxurious velvet depths. His eyes swept from one dear familiar object to another, in the great, softly lighted hall, and leaped ahead to the open door of the library. Then, somehow, he found himself face to face with his father in the dear, well-remembered room.

"Well, Burke, my boy, how are you?"

They were the same words that had been spoken months before in the President's office at the Denby Iron Works, and they were spoken by the same voice. They were spoken to the accompaniment of an outstretched hand, too, in each case. But, to Burke, who had heard them on both occasions, they were as different as darkness and daylight. He could not have defined it, even to himself; but he knew, the minute he grasped the outstretched hand and looked into his father's eyes, that the hated, impenetrable, insurmountable "wall" was gone. Yet there was nothing said, nothing done, except a conventional "Just a little matter of business, Burke, that I wanted to talk over with you," from the elder man; and an equally conventional "Yes, sir," from his son.

Then the two sat down. But, for Burke, the whole world had burst suddenly into song.

It was, indeed, a simple matter of business. It was not even an important one. Ordinarily it would have been Brett's place, or even one of his assistants', to speak of it. But the President of the Denby Iron Works took it up point by point, and dwelt lovingly on each detail. And Burke, his heart one wild pæan of rejoicing, sat with a grave countenance, listening attentively.

And when there was left not one small detail upon which to pin another word, and when Burke was beginning to dread the moment of dismissal, John Denby turned, as if casually, to a small clay tablet

on the desk near him. And Burke, following his father into a five-thousand-year-old past to decipher a Babylonian thumb-print, lost all fear of that dread dismissal.

Later came old Benton with the ale and the little cakes that Burke had always loved. With a pressure of his thumb, then, John Denby switched off half the lights, and the two, father and son, sat down before the big fireplace, with the cakes and ale between them on a low stand.

Behind the century-old andirons, the fire leaped and crackled, throwing weird shadows over the beamed ceiling, the book-lined walls, the cabinets of curios, bringing out here and there a bit of gold tooling behind a glass door or a glinting flash from bronze or porcelain. With a body at ease and a mind at rest, Burke leaned back in his chair with a long-drawn sigh, each tingling sense ecstatically responsive to every charm of light and shade and luxury.

Half an hour later he rose to go. John Denby, too, rose to his feet.

"You'll come again, of course," the father said, as he held out his hand. For the first time that evening there was a faint touch of constraint in his manner. "Suppose you come to dinner — Sunday. Will you?"

"Surely I will, and be glad —" With a swift surge of embarrassed color Burke Denby stopped short. In one shamed, shocked instant it had come to him that he had forgotten Helen — *forgotten* her! Not

for a long hour had he even remembered that there was such a person in existence. "Er — ah — that is," he began again, stammeringly.

An odd expression crossed John Denby's countenance.

"You will, of course, bring your wife," he said. "Good-night."

Burke mumbled an incoherent something and fled. The next moment he found himself in the hall with Benton, deferential and solicitous, holding his coat.

Again out in the crisp night air, Burke drew a long breath. Was it true? Had dad invited him to dinner next Sunday? *And with Helen?* What had happened? Had dad's heart got the better of his pride? Had he decided that quarreling did not pay? Did this mean the beginning of the end? Was he ready to take his son back into his heart? He had not said anything, *really*. He had just talked in the usual way, as if nothing had happened. But that would be like dad. Dad hated scenes. Dad would never say: "I'm sorry I was so harsh with you; come back — you and Helen. I want you!" — and then fall to crying and kissing like a woman. Dad would never do that.

It would be like dad just to pick up the thread of the old comradeship exactly where he had dropped it months ago. And that was what he had seemed to be doing that evening. He had talked just as he used to talk — except that never once had he men-

tioned — mother. Burke remembered this now, and wondered at it. It was so unusual — in dad. Had he done it purposely? Was there a hidden meaning back of it? He himself had not liked to think of mother, lately; yet, somehow, she seemed always to be in his mind. In spite of himself he was always wondering what she would think of — Helen. But, surely, dad —

With his thoughts in a dizzy whirl of excitement and questionings, Burke thrust his key into the lock and let himself into his own apartment.

The hall — never had it looked so hopelessly cheap and small. Burke, still under the spell of Benton's solicitous ministrations, jerked off his hat and coat and hung them up. Then he strode into the living-room.

Helen, fully dressed, was sitting at the table, reading a magazine.

"Hullo! Sitting up, are you, chicken?" he greeted her, brushing her cheek with his lips. "I told you not to; but maybe it's just as well you did — I might have waked you," he laughed boyishly. "Guess what's happened!"

"Got a raise?" Helen's voice was eager.

Her husband frowned.

"No. I got one last month, you know. I'm getting a hundred now. What more can you expect — in my position?" He spoke coldly, with a tinge of sharpness. He was wondering why Helen always managed to take the zest out of anything he was

going to do, or say. Then, with an obvious effort at gayety, he went on: "It's better than a raise, chicken. Dad's invited us to dinner next Sunday — both of us."

"To dinner! Only to dinner?"

"*Only* to dinner! Great Cæsar, Helen — *only* to dinner!"

"Well, I can't help it, Burke. It just makes me mad to see you jump and run and be so pleased over just a dinner, when it ought to be for every dinner and all the time; and you know it."

"But, Helen, it is n't the *dinner*. It's that — that dad *cares*." The man's voice softened, and became not quite steady. "That maybe he's forgiven me. That he's going to be now the — the old dad that I used to know. Oh, Helen, I've *missed* him so! I've —"

But his wife interrupted tartly.

"Well, I should think 't was time he did forgive you — and I'm not saying I think there was anything to forgive, either. There would n't have been, if he had n't tried to interfere with what was our own business — yours and mine."

There was a brief silence. Burke, looking very white and stern, had got to his feet, and was moving restlessly about the room.

"Did you think he was — giving in?" asked Helen at last.

"He was very kind."

"What did you tell him?"

"What do you mean?"

"About the dinner, Sunday."

"I don't know, exactly. I said — something; yes, I think. I meant it for yes — then." The man spoke with sudden utter weariness.

There was another brief silence. A dawning shrewdness was coming into Helen's eyes.

"Oh, of course, yes. We'd want to go," she murmured. "It *might* mean he was giving in, could n't it?"

There was no reply.

"Do you think he *was* giving in?"

Still no reply.

Helen scowled.

"Burke, why in the world don't you answer me?" she demanded crossly. "You were talkative enough a minute ago, when you came in. I should think you might have enough thought of *my* interests to want us to go to live with your father, if there's any chance of it. And while 't would n't be *my* way to jump the minute he held out his hand, yet if this dinner really means that we'll be going up there to live pretty soon, why —"

"Helen!" Burke had winced visibly, as if from a blow. "*Can't* you see anything, or talk anything, but our going up there to live? It's enough for me that dad just looked at me to-night with the old look in his eyes; that somehow he's smashed that confounded wall between us; that — But what's the use? Never mind the dinner. We won't go."

"Nonsense, Burke! Don't be silly. Of course we're going! I would n't miss it for the world —

under the circumstances." And Helen, with an air of finality, rose to her feet to prepare for bed.

Her husband, looking after her with eyes that were half resigned, half rebellious, for the second time that evening gave a sigh of utter weariness, and turned away.

They went to the dinner. Helen became really very interested and enthusiastic in her preparations for it; and even Burke, after a time, seemed to regain a little of his old eagerness. They had, to be sure, nearly a quarrel over the dress and hat that Helen wished to wear. But after some argument, and not a few tears, she yielded to her husband's none too gently expressed abhorrence of the hat in question (which was a new one), and of the dress — one he had always disliked.

"But I wanted to make a good impression," pouted Helen.

"Exactly! So do I want you to," returned her husband significantly. And there the matter ended.

It was not a success — that dinner. Helen, intent on making her "good impression," very plainly tried to be admiring, entertaining, and solicitous of her host's welfare and happiness. She resulted in being nauseatingly flattering, pert, and inquisitive. John Denby, at first very evidently determined to give no just cause for criticism of his own behavior, was the perfection of courtesy and cordiality. Even when, later, he was unable quite to hide his annoyance at the persistent and assiduous attentions and

questions of his daughter-in-law, he was yet courteous, though in unmistakable retreat.

Burke Denby — poor Burke! With every sense and sensitiveness keyed to instant response to each tone and word and gesture of the two before him, each passing minute was, to Burke, but a greater torture than the one preceding it. Long before dinner was over, he wished himself and Helen at home; and as soon as was decently possible after the meal, he peremptorily suggested departure.

"I could n't stand it! I could n't stand it another minute," he told himself passionately, as he hurried Helen down the long elm-shaded walk leading to the street. "But dad — dad was a brick! And he asked us to come again. *Again!* Good Heavens! As if I'd go through that again! It was so much worse *there* than at home. But I'm glad he did n't put her in mother's chair. I don't think even I could have stood that — to-day!"

"Well, that's over," murmured Helen complacently, as they turned into the public sidewalk, — "and well over! Still, I did n't enjoy myself so very much, and I don't believe you did, either," she laughed, "else you would n't have been in such a taking to get away."

There was no answer. Helen, however, evidently sure of her ground, did not seem to notice. She yawned pleasantly.

"Guess I'm sleepy. Ate too much. *'T was* a good dinner; and, just as I told your father, things always

taste especially good when you don't get much at home. I said it on purpose. I thought maybe 't would make him think."

Still silence.

Helen turned sharply and peered into her husband's face.

"What's the matter?" she demanded suspiciously. "Why are you so glum?"

Burke, instantly alert to the danger of having another scene such as had followed Gleason's first visit, desperately ran to cover.

"Nothing, nothing!" He essayed a gay smile, and succeeded. "I'm stupid, that's all. Maybe I'm sleepy myself."

"It can't be you're put out 'cause we came away so early! You suggested it yourself." Her eyes were still suspiciously bent upon him.

"Not a bit of it! I wanted to come."

She relaxed and took her gaze off his face. The unmistakable sincerity in his voice this last time had carried conviction.

"Hm-m; I thought you did," she murmured contentedly again. "Still, I was kind of scared when you proposed it. I did n't suppose 't was proper to eat and run. Mother always said so. Do you think he minded it — your father?"

"Not a bit!" Burke, in his thankfulness to have escaped the threatened scene, was enabled to speak lightly, almost gayly.

"Hm-m. Well, I'm glad. I would n't have wanted

him to mind. I *tried* to be 'specially nice to him, did n't I?"

"You did, certainly." Burke's lips came together a little grimly; but Helen's eyes were turned away; and after a moment's pause she changed the subject — to her husband's infinite relief.

CHAPTER IX

A BOTTLE OF INK

BURKE DENBY did not attempt to deceive himself after that Sunday dinner. His marriage had been a mistake, and he knew it. He was disappointed, ashamed, and angry. He told himself that he was heartbroken; that he still loved Helen dearly — only he did not like to be with her now. She made him nervous, and rubbed him the wrong way. Her mood never seemed to fit in with his. She had so many little ways —

Sometimes he told himself irritably that he believed that, if it were a big thing like a crime that Helen had committed, he could be heroic and forgiving, and glory in it. But forever to battle against a succession of never-ending irritations, always to encounter the friction of antagonistic aims and ideals — it was maddening. He was ashamed of himself, of course. He was ashamed of lots of things that he said and did. But he could not help an explosion now and then. He felt as if somewhere, within him, was an irresistible force driving him to it.

And the pity of it! Was he not, indeed, to be pitied? What had he not given up? As if it were his fault that he was now so disillusioned! He had supposed that marriage with Helen would be a fresh joy every morning, a new delight every evening,

an unbelievable glory of happiness — just being together.

Now — he did not want to be together. He did not want to go home to fretfulness, fault-finding, slovenliness, and perpetual criticism. He wanted to go home to peace and harmony, big, quiet rooms, servants that knew their business, and — dad.

And that was another thing — dad. Dad had been right. He himself had been wrong. But that did not mean that it was easy to own up that he had been wrong. Sometimes he hardly knew which cut the deeper: that he had been proved wrong, thus losing his happiness, or that his father had been proved right, thus placing him in a position to hear the hated "I told you so."

That Helen could never make him happy Burke was convinced now. Never had he realized this so fully as since seeing her at his father's table that Sunday. Never had her "ways" so irritated him. Never had he so poignantly realized the significance of what he had lost — and won. Never had he been so ashamed — or so ashamed because he was ashamed — as on that day. Never, he vowed, would he be placed in the same position again.

As to Helen's side of the matter — Burke quite forgot that there was such a thing. When one is so very sorry for one's self, one forgets to be sorry for anybody else. And Burke was, indeed, very sorry for himself. Having never been in the habit of taking disagreeable medicine, he did not know how to take

it now. Having been always accustomed to consider only himself, he considered only himself now. That Helen, too, might be disappointed and disillusioned never occurred to him.

It was perhaps a month later that another invitation to dinner came from John Denby. This time Burke did not stutter out a joyous, incoherent acceptance. He declined so promptly and emphatically that he quite forgot his manners, for the moment, and had to attach to the end of his refusal a hurried and ineffectual "Er — thank you; you are very kind, I'm sure!" He looked up then and met his father's eyes. But instantly his gaze dropped.

"Er — ah — Helen is not well at all, dad," he still further added, nervously. "Of course I'll speak to her. But I don't think we can come."

There was a moment's pause. Then, very gravely, John Denby said: "Oh, I am sorry, son."

Burke, with a sudden tightening of his throat, turned and walked away.

"He did n't laugh, he did n't sneer, he did n't look *anyhow*, only just plain sorry," choked the young man to himself. "And he had such a magnificent chance to do — all of them. But he just — understood."

Burke "spoke to Helen" that night.

"Father asked us to dinner next Sunday; but — I said I did n't think we could go. I told him you were n't feeling well. I did n't think you'd want to go; and — I did n't want to go myself."

Helen frowned and pouted.

"Well, I've got my opinion of folks who refuse an invitation without even asking 'em if they want to go," she bridled. "Not that I mind much, in this case, though, — if it's just a dinner. I thought once, maybe he meant something — that he was giving in, you know. But I have n't seen any signs of *that*. And as for just going to dinner — I can't say I am 'specially anxious for that — mean as I feel now."

"No, I thought not," said Burke.

And there the matter ended. As the summer passed, Burke fell into the way of going often to see his father, though never at meal-time. He went alone. Helen said she did not care to go, and that she did not see what fun Burke could find in it, anyway.

To Burke, these hours that he spent with his father chatting and smoking in the dim old library, or on the vine-shaded veranda, were like a breeze blowing across the desert of existence — like water in a thirsty land. From day to day he planned for these visits. From hour to hour he lived upon them.

To all appearances John Denby and his son had picked up their old comradeship exactly where the marriage had severed it. Even to Burke's watchful, sensitive eyes the "wall" seemed quite gone. There was, however, one difference: mother was never mentioned. John Denby never spoke of her now.

There was plenty to talk about. There were all the old interests, and there was business. Burke was giving himself heart and soul to business these days.

In July he won another promotion, and was given an advance in wages. Often, to Burke's infinite joy, his father consulted him about matters and things quite beyond his normal position, and showed in other ways his approval of his son's progress. Helen, the marriage, and the Dale Street home life were never mentioned — for which Burke was thankful.

"He *could n't* say anything I'd want to hear," said Burke to himself, at times. "And I — *I* can't say anything *he* wants to hear. Best forget it — if we can."

To "forget it" seemed, indeed, in these days, to be Burke's aim and effort. Always had Burke tried to forget things. From the day his six-months-old fingers had flung the offending rattle behind him had Burke endeavored to thrust out of sight and mind everything that annoyed — and Helen and marriage had become very annoying. Systematically, therefore, he was trying to forget them. His attitude, indeed, was not unlike that of a small boy who, weary of his game of marbles, cries, "Oh, come, let's play something else. I'm tired of this!" — an attitude which, naturally, was not conducive to happiness, either for himself or for any one else — particularly as the game he was playing was marriage, not marbles.

The summer passed and October came. Life at the Dale Street flat had settled into a monotony of discontent and dreariness. Helen, discouraged, disappointed, and far from well, dragged through the housework day by day, wishing each night that it

were morning, and each morning that it were night — a state of mind scarcely conducive to happiness on her part.

For all that Burke was away so many evenings now, Helen was not so lonely as she had been in the spring; for in Mrs. Jones's place had come a new neighbor, Mrs. Cobb. And Mrs. Cobb was even brighter and more original than Mrs. Jones ever was, and Helen liked her very much. She was a mine of information as to housekeeping secrets, and she was teaching Helen how to make the soft and dainty little garments that would be needed in November. But she talked even more loudly than Mrs. Jones had talked; and her laugh was nearly always the first sound that Burke heard across the hall every morning. Moreover, she possessed a phonograph which, according to Helen, played "perfectly grand tunes"; and some one of these tunes was usually the first thing that Burke heard every night when he came home. So he called her coarse and noisy, and declared she was even worse than Mrs. Jones; whereat Helen retorted that of course he *would n't* like her, if *she* did — which (while possibly true) did not make him like either her or Mrs. Cobb any better.

The baby came in November. It was a little girl. Helen wanted to call her "Vivian Mabelle." She said she thought that was a swell name, and that it was the name of her favorite heroine in a perfectly grand book. But Burke objected strenuously. He declared very emphatically that no daughter of his

should have to go through life tagged like a vaudeville fly-by-night.

Of course Helen cried, and of course Burke felt ashamed of himself. Helen's tears had always been a potent weapon — though, from over-use, they were fast losing a measure of their power. The first time he saw her cry, the foundations of the earth sank beneath him, and he dropped into a fathomless abyss from which he thought he would never rise. It was the same the next time, and the next. The fourth time, as he felt the now familiar sensation of sinking down, down, down, he outflung desperate hands and found an unexpected support — his temper. After that it was always with him. It helped to tinge with righteous indignation his despair, and it kept him from utterly melting into weak subserviency. Still, even yet, he was not used to them — his wife's tears. Sometimes he fled from them; sometimes he endured them in dumb despair behind set teeth; sometimes he raved and ranted in a way he was always ashamed of afterwards. But still they had the power, in a measure, to make his heart like water within him.

So now, about the baby's name, he called himself a brute and a beast to bring tears to the eyes of the little mother — toward whom, since the baby's advent, he felt a remorseful tenderness. But he still maintained that he could have no man, or woman, call his daughter "Vivian Mabelle."

"But I should think you'd let me name my own baby," wailed his wife.

Burke choked back a hasty word and assumed his pet "I'll-be-patient-if-it-kills-me" air.

"And you shall name it," he soothed her. "Listen! Here are pencil and paper. Now, write down a whole lot of names that you'd like, and I'll promise to select one of them. Then you'll be naming the baby all right. See?"

Helen did not "see," quite, that she would be naming the baby; but, knowing from past experience of her husband's temper that resistance would be unpleasant, she obediently took the paper and spent some time writing down a list of names.

Burke frowned a good deal when he saw the list, and declared that it was pretty poor pickings, and that he ought to have known better than to have bound himself to a silly-fool promise like that. But he chose a name (he said he would keep his word, of course), and he selected "Dorothy Elizabeth" as being less impossible than its accompanying "Veras," "Violets," and "Clarissa Muriels."

For the first few months after the baby's advent, Burke spent much more time at home, and seemed very evidently to be trying to pay especial attention to his wife's comfort and welfare. He was proud of the baby, and declared it was the cutest little kid going. He poked it in its ribs, thrust a tentative finger into the rose-leaf of a hand (emitting a triumphant chuckle of delight when the rose-leaf became a tightly clutching little fist), and even allowed the baby to be placed one or twice in his rather reluctant

and fearful arms. But, for the most part, he contented himself with merely looking at it, and asking how soon it would walk and talk, and when would it grow its teeth and hair.

Burke was feeling really quite keenly these days the solemnity and responsibility of fatherhood. He had called into being a new soul. A little life was in his hands to train. By and by this tiny pink roll of humanity would be a prattling child, a little girl, a young lady. And all the way she would be turning to him for companionship and guidance. It behooved him, indeed, to look well to himself, that he should be in all ways a fit pattern.

It was a solemn thought. No more tempers, tantrums, and impatience. No more idle repinings and useless regrets. What mattered it if he were disillusioned and heartsick? Did he want this child of his, this beautiful daughter, to grow up in such an atmosphere? Never! At once, therefore, he must begin to cultivate patience, contentment, tranquillity, and calmness of soul. He, the pattern, must be all things that he would wish her to be.

And how delightful it would be when she was old enough to meet him on his own ground — to be a companion for him, the companion he had not found in his wife! She would be pretty, of course, sweet-tempered, and cheerful. (Was he not to train her himself?) She would be capable and sensible, too. He would see to that. To no man, in the future, should she bring the tragedy of disillusionment that her

mother had brought to *him*. No, indeed! For that matter, however, he should not let her marry any one for a long time. He should keep her himself. Perhaps he would not let her marry at all. He did not think much of this marriage business, anyway. Not that he was going to show that feeling any longer now, of course. From now on he was to show only calm contentment and tranquillity of soul, no matter what the circumstances. Was he not a father? Had he not, in the hollow of his hand, a precious young life to train?

Again all this was very well in theory. But in practice —

Dorothy Elizabeth was not six months old before the young father discovered that parenthood changed conditions, not people. He felt just as irritated at the way Helen buttered a whole slice of bread at a time, and said "swell" and "you was," as before; just as impatient because he could not buy what he wanted; just as annoyed at the purple cushion on the red sofa.

He was surprised and disappointed. He told himself that he had supposed that when a fellow made good resolutions, he was given some show of a chance to keep them. But as if any one *could* cultivate calm contentment and tranquillity of soul as he was situated!

First, there were not only all his old disappointments and annoyances to contend with, but a multitude of new ones. It was as if, indeed, each particular torment had taken unto itself wife and children, so numerous

had they become. There was really now no peace at home. There was nothing but the baby. He had not supposed that any one thing or person could so monopolize everything and everybody.

When the baby was awake, Helen acted as if she thought the earth swung on its axis solely to amuse it. When it slept, she seemed to think the earth ought to stand still — lest it wake Baby up. With the same wholesale tyranny she marshaled into line everything and everybody on the earth, plainly regarding nothing and no one as of consequence, except in its relationship to Baby.

Such unimportant things as meals and housework, in comparison with Baby, were of even less than second consequence; and Burke grew to feel himself more and more an alien and a nuisance in his own home. Moreover, where before he had found disorder and untidiness, he now found positive chaos. And however fond he was of the Baby, he grew unutterably weary of searching for his belongings among Baby's rattles, balls, shirts, socks, milk bottles, blankets, and powder-puffs.

The "cool, calm serenity" of his determination he found it difficult to realize; and the delights and responsibilities of fatherhood began to pall upon him. It looked to be so long a way ahead, even to teeth, talking, and walking, to say nothing of the charm and companionship of a young lady daughter!

Children were all very well, of course, — very desirable. But did they never do anything but cry?

Could n't they be taught that nights were for sleep, and that other people in the house had some rights besides themselves? And must they *always* choose four o'clock in the morning for a fit of the colic? Helen said it was colic. For his part, he believed it was nothing more or less than temper — plain, right-down temper!

And so it went. Another winter passed, and spring came. Matters were no better, but rather worse. A series of incompetent maids had been adding considerably to the expense — and little to the comfort — of the household. Helen, as a mistress, was not a success. She understood neither her own duties nor those of the maid — which resulted in short periods of poor service and frequent changes.

July came with its stifling heat, and Dorothy Elizabeth, now twenty months old, showed a daily increasing disapproval of life in general and of her own existence in particular. Helen, worn and worried, and half sick from care and loss of sleep, grew day by day more fretful, more difficult to get along with. Burke, also half sick from loss of sleep, and consumed with a fierce, inward rebellion against everything and everybody, including himself, was no less difficult to get along with.

Of course this state of affairs could not continue forever. The tension had to snap sometime. And it snapped — over a bottle of ink in a baby's hand.

It happened on Bridget's "afternoon out," when Helen was alone with the baby. Dorothy Elizabeth,

propped up in her high-chair beside the dining-room table, where her mother was writing a letter, reached covetous hands toward the fascinating little fat black bottle. The next instant a wild shout of glee and an inky tide surging from an upside-down bottle, held high above a golden head, told that the quest had been successful.

Things happened then very fast. There were a dismayed cry from Helen, half a-dozen angry spats on a tiny hand, a series of shrieks from Dorothy Elizabeth, and a rapidly spreading inky pall over baby, dress, table, rug, and Helen's new frock.

At that moment Burke appeared in the door.

With wrathful eyes he swept the scene before him, losing not one detail of scolding woman, shrieking child, dinnerless table, and inky chaos. Then he strode into the room.

"Well, by George!" he snapped. "Nice restful place for a tired man to come to, is n't it? This is your idea of a happy home, I suppose!"

The overwrought wife and mother, with every nerve tingling, turned sharply.

"Oh, yes, that's right — blame me! Blame me for everything! Maybe you think *I* think this is a happy, restful place, too! Maybe you think this is what *I* thought 't would be — being married to you! But I can tell you it just is n't! Maybe you think I ain't tired of working and pinching and slaving, and never having any fun, and being scolded and blamed all the time because I don't eat and walk and stand up

and sit down the way you want me to, and — Where are you goin'?" she broke off, as her husband reached for the hat he had just tossed aside, and started for the door.

Burke turned quietly. His face was very white.

"I'm going down to the square to get something to eat. Then I'm going up to father's. And — you need n't sit up for me. I shall stay all night."

"*All — night!*"

"Yes. I'd like to sleep — for once. And that's what I can't do — here." The next moment the door had banged behind him.

Helen, left alone with the baby, fell back limply.

"Why, Baby, he — he —" Then she caught the little ink-stained figure to her and began to cry convulsively.

In the street outside Burke strode along with his head high and his jaw sternly set. He was very angry. He told himself that he had a right to be angry. Surely a man was entitled to *some* consideration!

In spite of it all, however, there was, in a far-away corner of his soul, an uneasy consciousness of a tiny voice of scorn dubbing this running away of his the act of a coward and a cad.

Very resolutely, however, he silenced this voice by recounting again to himself how really abused he was. It was a long story. It served to occupy his mind all through the unappetizing meal he tried to eat at the cheap restaurant before climbing Elm Hill.

His father greeted him cordially, and with no sur-

prise in voice or manner — which was what Burke had expected, inasmuch as he had again fallen into the way of spending frequent evenings at the old home. To-night, however, Burke himself was constrained and ill at ease. His jaw was still firmly set and his head was still high; but his heart was beginning to fail him, and his mind was full of questionings.

How would his father take it — this proposition to stay all night? He would understand something of what it meant. He could not help but understand. But what would he say? How would he act? Would he say in actions, if not in words, that dreaded "I told you so"? Would it unseal his lips on a subject so long tabooed, and set him into a lengthy dissertation on the foolishness of his son's marriage? Burke believed that, as he felt now, he could not stand that; but he could stand less easily going back to the Dale Street flat that night. He could go to a hotel, of course. But he did not want to do that. He wanted dad. But he did not want dad — to talk.

"How's the baby?" asked John Denby, as Burke dropped himself into a chair on the cool, quiet veranda. "I thought she was not looking very well the last time Helen wheeled her up here." Always John Denby's first inquiry now was for his little granddaughter.

"Eh? The baby? Oh, she — she's all right. That is" — Burke paused for a short laugh — "she's *well*."

John Denby took his cigar from his lips and turned sharply.

"But she's *not* — all right?"

Burke laughed again.

"Oh, yes, she's all right, too, I suppose," he retorted, a bit grimly. "But she was — er — humph! Well, I'll tell you." And he gave a graphic description of his return home that night.

"Jove, what a mess! — and *ink*, too," ejaculated John Denby, with more than a tinge of sympathy in his voice. "How'd she ever manage to clean it up?"

Burke shrugged his shoulders.

"Ask me something easy. I don't know, I'm sure. I cleared out."

"Without — your dinner?" John Denby asked the question after a very brief, but very tense, silence.

"My dinner — I got in the square."

Burke's lips snapped together again tight shut. John Denby said nothing. His eyes were gravely fixed on the glowing tip of the cigar in his hand.

Burke cleared his throat and hesitated. He had not intended to ask his question quite so soon; but suddenly he was consumed with an overwhelming desire to speak out and get it over. He cleared his throat again.

"Dad — would you mind — my sleeping here tonight? It's just that I — I want a good night's sleep, for once," he plunged on hurriedly, in answer to a swift something that he saw leap to his father's eyes. "And I can't get it there — with the baby and all."

There was a perceptible pause. Then, steadily, and with easy cordiality, came John Denby's reply.

"Why, certainly, my boy. I'm glad to have you. I'll ring at once for Benton to see that — that your old room is made ready for you," he added, touching a push-button near his chair.

Later, when Benton had come and gone, with his kindly old face alight and eager, Burke braced himself for what he thought was inevitable. Something would come, of course. The only question was, what would it be?

But nothing came — that is, nothing in the nature of what Burke had expected. John Denby, after Benton had left the veranda, turned to his son with a pleasantly casual —

"Oh, Brett was saying to-day that the K. & O. people had granted us an extension of time on that bridge contract."

"Er — yes," plunged in Burke warmly. And with the words, every taut nerve and muscle in his body relaxed as if cut in twain.

It came later, though, when he had ceased to look for it. It came just as he was thinking of saying good-night.

"It has occurred to me, son," broached John Denby, after a short pause, "that Helen may be tired and in sore need of a rest."

Burke caught his breath, and held it a moment suspended. When before had his father mentioned Helen, save to speak of her casually in connection with the baby?

"Er — er — y-yes, very likely," he stammered,

a sudden vision coming to him of Helen as he had seen her on the floor in the midst of the inky chaos a short time before.

"You're not the only one that is n't finding the present state of affairs a — a bed of roses, Burke," said John Denby then.

"Er — ah — n-no," muttered the amazed husband. In his ears now rang Helen's — "Maybe you think I ain't tired of working and pinching and slaving!" Involuntarily he shivered and glanced at his father — dad could not, of course, have *heard!*

"I have a plan to propose," announced John Denby quietly, after a moment's silence. "As I said, I think Helen needs a rest — and a change. I've seen quite a little of her since the baby came, you know, and I've noticed — many things. I will send her a check for ten thousand dollars to-morrow if she will take the baby and go away for a time — say, to her old home for a visit. But there is one other condition," he continued, lifting a quick hand to silence Burke's excited interruption. "I need a rest and change myself. I should like to go to Alaska again; and I'd like to have you go with me. Will you go?"

Burke sprang to his feet and began to pace up and down the wide veranda. (From boyhood Burke had always "thrashed things out" on his feet.) For a full minute now he said nothing. Then, abruptly, he stopped and wheeled about. His face was very white.

"Dad, I can't. It seems too much like — like —"

"No, it is n't in the least like quitting, or running

away," supplied John Denby, reading unerringly his son's hesitation. "You're not quitting at all. I'm asking you to go. Indeed, I'm begging you to go, Burke. I want you. I need you. I'm not an old man, I know; but I feel like one. These last two years have not been — er — a bed of roses for me, either." In spite of a certain lightness in his words, the man's voice shook a little. "I don't think you know, boy, how your old dad has — missed you."

"Don't I? I can — guess." Burke wheeled and resumed his nervous stride. The words, as he flung them out, were at once a challenge and an admission. "But — Helen —" He stopped short, waiting.

"I've answered that. I've told you. Helen needs a rest and a change."

Again to the distraught husband's ears came the echo of a woman's wailing — "Maybe you think I ain't tired of working and pinching and slaving —"

"Then you don't think Helen will feel that I'm running away?" A growing hope was in his eyes, but his brow still carried its frown of doubt.

"Not if she has a check for — ten thousand dollars," replied John Denby, a bit grimly.

Burke winced. A painful red reached his forehead.

"It is, indeed, a large sum, sir, — too large," he resented, with sudden stiffness. "Thank you; but I'm afraid we can't accept it, after all."

John Denby saw his mistake at once; but he did not make the second mistake of showing it.

"Nonsense!" he laughed lightly, with no sign of

the sudden panic of fear within him lest the look on his son's face meant the downfall of all his plans. "I made it large purposely. Remember, I'm borrowing her husband for a season; and she needs some recompense! Besides, it'll mean a playday for herself. You'll not be so unjust to Helen as to refuse her the means to enjoy that! — not that she'll spend it all for that, of course. But it will be a comfortable feeling to know that she has it."

"Y-yes, of course," hesitated Burke, still frowning.

"Then we'll call that settled."

"I know; but — Of course if you put it *that* way, why, I —"

"Well, I do put it just that way," nodded the father lightly. "Now, let's go in. I've got some maps and time-tables I want you to see. I'm planning a different route from the one we took with the doctor — a better one, I think. But let's see what you say. Come!" And he led the way to the library.

Burke's head came up alertly. His shoulders lost their droop and his brow its frown. A new light flamed into his eyes and a new springiness leaped into his step. Always, from the time his two-year-old lips had begged to "see the wheels go 'round," had Burke's chief passion and delight been traveling. As he bent now over the maps and time-tables that his father spread before him, voice and hands fairly trembled with eagerness. Then suddenly a chance word sent him to his feet again, the old look of despair on his face.

"Dad, I can't," he choked. "I can't be a quitter. You don't want me to be!"

With a sharp word John Denby, too, leaped to his feet. Something of the dogged persistence that had won for him wealth and power glowed in his eyes as he went straight to his son and laid both hands on his shoulders.

"Burke, I had not meant to say this," he began quietly; "but perhaps it's just as well that I do. Possibly you think I've been blind all these past months; but I have n't. I've seen — a good deal. Now I want you and Helen to be happy. I don't want to see your life — or hers — wrecked. I believe there's a chance yet for you two people to travel together with some measure of peace and comfort, and I'm trying to give you that chance. There's just one thing to do, I believe, and that is — to be away from each other for a while. You both need it. For weeks I've been planning and scheming how it could be done. How do you suppose I happened to have this Alaska trip all cut and dried even down to the train and boat schedules, if I had n't done some thinking? To-night came my chance. So I spoke."

"But — to be a quitter!"

"You're not quitting. You're — stopping to get your breath."

"There's — my work."

"You've made good, and more than good there, son. I've been proud of you — every inch of the way. You're no quitter there."

"Thanks, dad!" Only the sudden mist in his eyes and the shake in his voice showed how really moved Burke was. "But — Helen," he stammered then.

"Will be better off without you — for a time."

"And — I?"

"Will be better off without her — for the same time. While I — shall be, oh, so infinitely better off *with* you. Ah, son, but I've missed you so!" It was the same longing cry that had gone straight to Burke's heart a few minutes before. "You'll come?"

There was a tense silence. Burke's face plainly showed the struggle within him. A moment more, and he spoke.

"Dad, I'll have to think it out," he temporized brokenly. "I'll let you know in the morning."

"Good!" If John Denby was disappointed, he did not show it. "We'll let it go till morning, then. Meanwhile, it can do no harm to look at these, however," he smiled, with a wave of his hand toward the maps and time-tables.

"No, of course not," acquiesced Burke promptly, relieved that his father agreed so willingly to the delay.

Half an hour later he went upstairs to his old room to bed.

It was a fine old room. He had forgotten that a bedroom could be so large — and so convenient. Benton, plainly, had been there. Also, plainly, his hand had not lost its cunning, nor his brain the memory of how Master Burke "liked things."

The arrangement of the lights, the glass of milk by his bed, the turned-down spread and sheet, the latest magazine ready to his hand — even the size and number of towels in his bathroom testified to Benton's loving hand and good memory.

With a sigh that was almost a sob Burke dropped himself into a chair and looked about him.

It was all so peaceful, so restful, so comfortable. And it was so quiet. He had forgotten that a room could be so quiet.

In spite of his weariness, Burke's preparations for bed were both lengthy and luxurious — he had forgotten what absolute content lay in plenty of space, towels, and hot water, to say nothing of soap that was in its proper place, and did not have to be fished out of a baby-basket or a kitchen sink.

Burke did not intend to go to sleep at once. He intended first to settle in his mind what he would do with this proposition of his father's. He would have to refuse it, of course. It would not do. Still, he ought to give it proper consideration for dad's sake. That much was due dad.

He stretched himself luxuriously on the bed (he had forgotten that a bed could be so soft and so "just right") and began to think. But the next thing he knew he was waking up.

His first feeling was a half-unconscious but delightful sensation of physical comfort. His next a dazed surprise as his slowly opened eyes encountered shapes and shadows and arc-light beams on the

walls and ceiling quite unlike those in his Dale Street bedroom. Then instantly came a vague but poignant impression that "something had happened," followed almost as quickly by full realization.

Like a panorama, then, the preceding evening lay before him: Helen, the crying baby, the trailing ink, the angry words, the flight, dad, his welcome, the pleasant chat, the remarkable proposition. Oh, yes! And it was of the proposition that he was going to think. He could not accept it, of course, but —

What a trump dad had been to offer it! What a trump he had been in the *way* he offered it, too! What a trump he had been all through about it, for that matter. Not a word of reproach, not a hint of patronage. Not even a look that could be construed into that hated "I told you so." Just a straightforward offer of this check for Helen, and the trip for himself, and actually in a casual, matter-of-fact tone of voice as if ten-thousand-dollar checks and Alaskan trips were everyday occurrences.

But they were n't! A trip like that did not drop into a man's plate every day. Of course he could not take it — but what a dandy one it would be! And with dad —!

For that matter, dad really needed him. Dad ought not to go off like that alone, and so far. Besides, dad *wanted* him. How his voice had trembled when he had said, "I don't think you know, boy, how your old dad has missed you"! As if he did n't, indeed! As if he had n't done *some* missing on his own account!

And the check. Of course he could not let Helen accept that, either, — ten thousand dollars! But how generous of dad to offer it — and of course it *would* be good for Helen. Poor Helen! She needed a rest, all right, and she deserved one. It *would* be fine for her to go back to her old home town for a little while, and no mistake. Not that she would need to spend the whole ten thousand dollars on that, of course. But even a little slice of a sum like that would give her all the frills and furbelows she wanted for herself and the baby, and send them into the country for all the rest of the summer, besides leaving nine-tenths of it for a nest-egg for the future. And what a comfortable feeling it would give her — always a little money when she wanted it for anything! No more of the hated pinching and starving, for he should tell her to spend it and take some comfort with it. That was what it was for. Besides, when it was gone, *he* would have some for her. What a boon it would be to her — that ten thousand dollars! Of course, looking at it in that light, it was almost his *duty* to accept the proposition, and give her the chance to have it.

But then, after all, he could n't. Why, it was like accepting charity; he had n't earned it. Still, if hard work and anguish of mind counted, he *had* earned it twice over, slaving away at the beck of Brett and his minions. And he had made good — so far. Dad had said so. What a trump dad was to speak as he did! And when *dad* said a thing like that, it meant something!

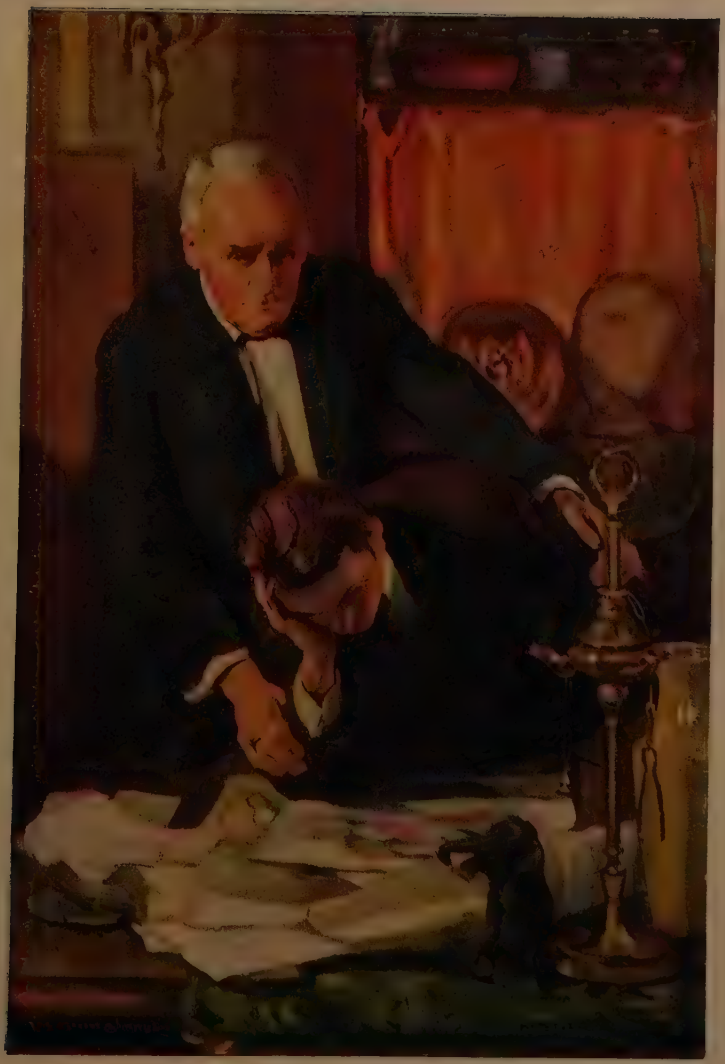
Well, there was nothing to do, of course, but to go back and buckle down to work — and to life in the Dale Street flat. To be sure, there was the baby. Of course he was fond of the baby; and it was highly interesting to see her achieve teeth, hair, a backbone, and sense — if only she would hurry up a little faster, though. Did babies always take so long to grow up?

Burke stretched himself luxuriously and gazed about the room. The arc-light outside had gone out and dawn was approaching. More and more distinctly each loved object in the room was coming into view. To his nostrils came the perfume of the roses and honeysuckles in the garden below his window. To his ears came the chirp and twitter of the bird-calls from the trees. Over his senses stole the soothing peace of absolute physical ease.

Once more, drowsily, he went back to his father's offer. Once more, in his mind, he argued it — but this time with a difference. Thus, so potent, sometimes, is the song of a bird, the scent of a flower, the shape of a loved, familiar object, or even the feel of a soft bed beneath one.

After all, might he not be making a serious mistake if he did not accede to his father's wishes? Of course, so far as he, personally, was concerned, the answer would be an unequivocal refusal of the offer. But there was his father to consider, and there was Helen to think of; yes, and the baby. How much better it would be for them — for all of them, if he accepted it!

Helen and the baby could have months of fresh



JOHN DENBY WENT STRAIGHT TO HIS SON AND LAID BOTH HANDS ON HIS SHOULDERS

air, ease, and happiness without delay, to say nothing of innumerable advantages later. Why, when you came to think of it, that would be enough, if there were nothing else! But there was something else. There was dad. Good old dad! How happy he'd be! Besides, dad really needed him. How ever had he thought for a moment of sending dad off to Alaska alone, and just after an illness, too! What could he be thinking of to consider it for a moment? That settled it. He should go. He would stifle all silly feelings of pride and the like, and he would make dad, Helen, and the baby happy.

Which question having been satisfactorily decided, Burke turned over and settled himself for a doze before breakfast. He did not get it, however. His mind was altogether too full of time-tables, boat schedules, mountain peaks, and forest trails.

Jove, but that was going to be a dandy trip!

It was later, while Burke was leisurely dressing and planning out the day before him, that the bothersome question came to him as to how he should tell Helen. He was reminded, also, emphatically, of the probable scene in store for him when he should go home at six o'clock that night. And he hated scenes. For that matter, there would probably be another one, too, when he told her that he was going away for a time. To be sure, there was the ten-thousand-dollar check; and of course very soon he could convince her that it was really all for her best happiness. After

she gave it a little thought, it would be all right, he was positive, but there was certain to be some unpleasantness at first, particularly as she was sure to be not a little difficult over his running — er — rather, *going* away the night before. And he wished he could avoid it in some way. If only he did not have to go home —

His face cleared suddenly. Why, of course! He would write. How stupid of him not to have thought of it before! He could say, then, just what he wanted to say, and she would have a chance to think it over calmly and sensibly, and see how really fine it was for her and the baby. That was the way to do it, and the only way. Writing, he could not be unnerved by her tears (of course she would cry at first — she always cried!) or exasperated into saying things he would be sorry for afterwards. He could say just enough, and not too much, in a letter, and say it right. Then, early in the following week, just before he was to start on his trip he would go down to the Dale Street house and spend the last two or three days with Helen and the baby, picking up his traps, and planning with Helen some of the delightful things she could do with that ten thousand dollars. By that time she would, of course, have entirely come around to his point of view (even if she had not seen it quite that way at first), and they could have a few really happy days together — something which would be quite impossible if they should meet now, with the preceding evening fresh in their minds, and

have one of their usual wretched scenes of tears, recriminations, and wranglings.

For the present, then, he would stay where he was. Helen would be all right — with Bridget. His father would be overjoyed, he knew; and as for the few toilet necessities — he could buy those. He needed some new things to take away. So that was settled.

With a mind at rest again and a heart aflame with joy, Burke hurried into his garments and skipped downstairs like a boy.

His face, before his lips got a chance, told his father of his decision. But his lips did not lag long behind. He had expected that his father would be pleased; but he was not quite prepared for the depth of emotion that shook his father's voice and dimmed his father's eyes, and that ended the half-uttered declaration of joy with what was very near a sob. If anything, indeed, were needed to convince Burke that he was doing just right in taking this trip with his father, it could be needed no longer after the look of ineffable peace and joy on that father's face.

Breakfast, with so much to talk of, prolonged itself like a college spread, until Burke, with a cry of dismay, pulled out his watch and leaped to his feet.

"Jove! Do you know what time it is, dad?" he cried laughingly. "Behold how this life of luxury has me already in its clutches! I should have been off an hour ago."

John Denby lifted a detaining hand.

"Not so fast, my boy," he smiled. "I've got you, and I mean to keep you — a few minutes longer."

"But —"

"Oh, I telephoned Brett this morning that you would n't be down till late, if you came at all."

"You telephoned *this morning!*" puzzled Burke, sinking slowly into his chair again. "But you did n't know then that I —" He stopped once more.

"No, I did n't know then that you'd agree to my proposition," answered John Denby, with a characteristically grim smile. "But I knew, if you did agree, we'd *both* have some talking to do. And if you did n't — *I* should. I meant still to convince you, you see."

"I see," nodded the younger man, smiling in his turn.

"So I would n't go down this morning. We've lots of plans to make. Besides, there's your letter."

"Yes, there's — my — letter." This time the young man did not smile. "I've got to write my letter, of course."

CHAPTER X

BY ADVICE OF COUNSEL

HELEN DENBY received the letter from her husband at two o'clock by a special messenger.

Helen had passed a sleepless night and an unhappy morning. The surge of bitter anger which at first, like the ink, had blackened everything it touched, soon spent itself, and left her weak and trembling. Dorothy Elizabeth, after her somewhat upsetting day, sank into an unusually sound slumber; but her mother, all through the long night watches, lay with sleepless eyes staring into the dark, thinking.

Helen was very angry with Burke. There was no gainsaying that. She was a little frightened, too, at what she herself had said. In a soberer moment she would not have spoken quite like that, certainly. But it had been so hateful — his asking if she called that a happy home! As if she did not want a happy home as much as he ever could!

To Helen, then, came her old vision of the daintily gowned wife welcoming her husband to the well-kept home; and all in the dark her cheek flushed hot.

How far short, indeed, of that ideal had she fallen! And she was going to be such a help to Burke; such an inspiration; such a guide, counselor, and friend! (Swiftly the words came galloping out of that long-forgotten honeymoon.) Had she helped him? Had

she been an inspiration, and a guide, and a counselor, and a friend? Poor Burke! He *had* given up a good deal for her sake. (With the consciousness of that vacant pillow by her side, a wave of remorseful tenderness swept over her.) And of course it must have been hard for him. They had told him not to marry her, too. They had warned him that she was not suited to him, that she would drag him —

With a low cry Helen sat up in bed suddenly.

"*Drag him down!*"

Had she dragged him down? No, no, not that — never that! She had been careless and thoughtless. She had not been a good housekeeper; and maybe sometimes she had been fretful and fault-finding, and — and horrid. But she loved him dearly. She had always loved him. It only needed something like this to show her how much she loved him. Why, he was Burke, her husband — Baby's father! As if ever she could let it be said that she had dragged him down!

Quivering, shaken with sobs, she fell back on the pillow. For a few moments she cried on convulsively. Then, with a tremulous indrawn breath, she opened her eyes and stared into the dark again. A new thought had come to her.

But there was time yet. Nothing dreadful had happened. She would show Burke, his friends, everybody, that she had not dragged him down. From now on she would try. Oh, how she would try! He should see. He *should* find a happy home when he came at night. She knew more, now, than she

did, about housekeeping. Besides, there was more money now, — a little more, — and she had some one to help her with the work. Bridget was really doing very well; and there was Mrs. Cobb, so kind and helpful. She would go to her for advice always. Never again should Burke come home and find such a looking place. Baby should be washed and dressed. She herself would be dressed and waiting. Dinner, too, even on Bridget's day out, should be all ready and waiting. As if ever again she would run the risk of Burke's having to flee from his own home because he could not stand it! He should see!

It was in this softened, exalted state of mind that Helen rose the next morning and proceeded to begin the carrying-out of her vows, by essaying the almost hopeless task (with Bridget's not overcheerful assistance) of putting into spotless order the entire apartment.

At two o'clock, when Burke's letter came, she was utterly weary and almost sick; but she was still in the softened, exalted state of the early morning.

With a wondering, half-frightened little cry at sight of the familiar writing, she began to read. John Denby's check for ten thousand dollars had fallen into her lap unnoticed.

My dear Helen [she read]: First let me apologize for flying off the handle the way I did last night. I should n't have done it. But, do you know? I believe I'm glad I did — for it's taught me something. Maybe you've discovered it, too. It's this: you and I have been getting on

each other's nerves, lately. We need a rest from each other.

Now, don't bristle up and take it wrong, my dear. Just be sensible and think. How many times a day do we snap and snarl at each other? You're tired and half sick with the work and the baby. I'm tired and half sick with *my* work, and we're always rubbing each other the wrong way. That's why I think we need a vacation from each other. And dad has made it possible for us to take one. He wants me to go to Alaska with him on a little trip. I want to go, of course. Then, too, I think I ought to go. Dad needs me. Not that he is old, but he is just getting over an illness, and his head bothers him a lot. I can be of real use to him.

At his own suggestion he is sending you the enclosed check. He wants you to accept it with his best wishes for a pleasant vacation. He suggests — and I echo him — that it would be a fine idea if you should take the baby and go back to your home town for a visit. I know your father and mother are not living; but there must be some one there whom you would like to visit. Or, better yet, now that you have the means, you would probably prefer a good hotel for headquarters, and then make short visits to all your friends. It would do you worlds of good, and Baby, too.

And now — I'm writing this instead of coming to tell it face to face, because I believe it's the best way. I'll be frank. After last night, we might say things when we first met that we'd be sorry for. And I don't want that to happen. So I'm going to stay up here for a day or two.

Let me see — to-day is Friday. We are due to leave next Wednesday. I'll be down the first of the week to say good-bye and pick up my traps. Meanwhile, chicken, you'll be all right with Bridget there; and just you put

your wits to work and go to planning out that vacation of yours, and how you're going to spend the money. Then you can be ready to tell me all about it when I come down.

Your affectionate husband,

BURKE.

Helen's first feeling, upon finishing the note, was one of utter stupefaction. With a dazed frown and a low ejaculation she turned the letter over and began to read it again — more slowly. This time she understood. But her thoughts were still in a whirl of surprised disbelief. Then, gradually, came a measure of conviction.

Fresh from her vigils of the night before, with its self-accusations and its heroic resolutions, she was so chastened and softened that there was more of grief than of anger in her first outburst.

She began to cry a little wildly.

Burke was going away. He *wanted* to go. He said they — they got on each other's nerves. He said they needed a vacation from each other. *Needed* one! As if they did! It was n't that. It was his father's idea. *She* knew. It was all his fault! But he was going — Burke was. He said he was. There would not be any chance now to show him the daintily gowned wife welcoming her husband home to a well-kept house. There would not be any chance to show how she had changed. There would not be —

But there would be — after he came back.

Helen stopped sobbing, and caught her breath

with a new hope in her eyes. Dorothy Elizabeth began to cry, and Helen picked her up and commenced to rock her.

Of course there *would* be time after he came back. And, after all, might it not be the wisest thing, to be away from each other for a time? Why, even this little while — a single night of Burke's being gone — had shown her where she stood! — had shown her where it was all leading to! Of course it was the best way, and Burke had seen it. It was right that he should go. And had they not provided for her? She was to go — There was a check somewhere —

Burrowing in her lap under Dorothy Elizabeth's warm little body, Helen dragged forth an oblong bit of crumpled paper. Carefully she spread it flat. The next moment her eyes flew wide open.

One thousand dollars! No, *ten* thousand! It could n't be! But it was. Ten thousand dollars! And she had been scolding and blaming them, when all the time they had been so generous! And it really *was* the best way, too, that they should be apart for a while. It would give her a chance to adjust herself and practice — and it would need some practice if she were really going to be that daintily gowned young wife welcoming her husband to a well-kept home! And with ten thousand dollars! What could n't they get with ten thousand dollars?

Dorothy Elizabeth, at that moment, emitted a sharp, frightened cry. For how was Dorothy Eliza-

beth to know that the spasmodic pressure that so hurt her was really only a ten-thousand-dollar hug of joy?

In less than half an hour, Helen, leaving the baby with Bridget, had sought Mrs. Cobb. She could keep her good news no longer.

"I came to tell you. I'm going away — Baby and I," she announced joyously. "We're going next week."

"Jiminy! You don't say so! But you don't mean you're goin' away ter *live?*"

"Oh, no. Just for a visit to my old home town where I was born — only 't will be a good long one. You see, we need a rest and a change so much — Baby and I do." There was a shade of importance in voice and manner.

"That you do!" exclaimed Mrs. Cobb, with emphasis. "And I'm glad you're goin'. But, sakes alive, I'm goin' ter miss ye, child!"

"I shall miss you, too," beamed Helen cordially.

"How long you goin' ter be gone?"

"I don't know, exactly. It'll depend, some, on Burke — I mean Mr. Denby — when he wants me to come back."

"Oh, ain't he goin', too?" An indefinable change came to Mrs. Cobb's voice.

"Oh, no, not with us," smiled Helen. "He's going to Alaska."

"To — *Alaska!* And, pray, what's he chasin' off to a heathen country like that for?"

"'T is n't heathen — Alaska is n't," flashed Helen, vaguely irritated without knowing why. "Heathen countries are — are always hot. Alaska's cold. Is n't Alaska up north — to the pole, 'most? It used to be, when I went to school."

"Maybe 't is; but that ain't sayin' why he's goin' there, instead of with you," retorted Mrs. Cobb. In spite of the bantering tone in which this was uttered, disapproval was plainly evident in Mrs. Cobb's voice.

"He's going with his father," answered Helen, with some dignity.

"His father! Humph!"

This time the disapproval was so unmistakably evident that Helen flamed into prompt defense, in righteous, wifely indignation.

"I don't know why you speak like that, Mrs. Cobb. Has n't he got a right to go with his father, if he wants to? Besides, his father needs him. Burke says he does."

"And *you* don't need him, I s'pose," flamed Mrs. Cobb, in her turn, nettled that her sympathetic interest should meet with so poor a welcome. "Of course it's none of my business, Mis' Denby, but it seems a shame to me for him ter let you and the baby go off alone like this, and so I spoke right out. I always speak right out — what I think."

Helen flushed angrily. However much she might find fault with her husband herself, she suddenly discovered a strong disinclination to allowing any

one else to do so. Besides, now, when he and his father had been so kind and generous —! She had not meant to tell Mrs. Cobb of the ten-thousand-dollar check, lest it lead to unpleasant questioning as to why it was sent. But now, in the face of Mrs. Cobb's unjust criticism, she flung caution aside.

"You're very kind," she began, a bit haughtily; "but, you see, this time you have made a slight mistake. I don't think it's a shame at all for him to go away with his father who needs him; and you won't, when you know what they've sent me. They sent me a check this afternoon for ten thousand dollars."

"*Ten — thousand — dollars!*"

"Yes," bowed Helen, with a triumphant "I-told-you-so" air, as Mrs. Cobb's eyes seemed almost to pop out of her head. "They sent it this very afternoon."

"For the land's sake!" breathed Mrs. Cobb. Then, as her dazed wits began to collect themselves, a new look came to her eyes. "They *sent* it?" she cried.

"By special messenger — yes," bowed Helen, again importantly.

"But how funny to *send* it, instead of bringing it himself — your husband, I mean."

Too late Helen saw her mistake. In a panic, now, lest unpleasant truths be discovered, she assumed an especially light, cheerful manner.

"Oh, no, I don't think it was funny a bit. He — he wanted it a surprise, I guess. And he wrote — a

letter, you know. A lovely letter, all about what a good time Baby and I could have with the money."

The suspicion in Mrs. Cobb's eyes became swift conviction. An angry red stained her cheeks — but it was not anger at Helen. That was clearly to be seen.

"Look a-here, Mis' Denby," she began resolutely, "I'm a plain woman, and I always speak right out. And I'm your friend, too, and I ain't goin' ter stand by and see you made a fool of, and not try ter lift a hand ter help. There's somethin' wrong here. If you don't know it, it's time you did. If you *do* know it, and are tryin' ter keep it from me, you might just as well stop right now, and turn 'round and tell me all about it. As I said before, I'm your friend, and — if it's what I think it is — you'll *need* a friend, you poor little thing! Now, what is it?"

Helen shook her head feebly. Her face went from white to red, and back again to white. Still determined to keep her secret if possible, she made a brave attempt to regain her old airiness of manner.

"Why, Mrs. Cobb, it's nothing — nothing at all!"

Mrs. Cobb exploded into voluble wrath.

"Nothin', is it? — when a man goes kitin' off ter Alaska, and sendin' his wife ten thousand dollars ter go somewheres else in the opposite direction! Maybe you think I don't know what that means. But I do! And he's tryin' ter play a mean, snivelin' trick on ye, and I ain't goin' ter stand for it. I never

did like him, with all his fine, lordly airs, a-thinkin' himself better than anybody else what walked the earth. But if I can help it, I ain't goin' ter see you cheated out of your just deserts."

"*Mrs. Cobb!*" expostulated the dismayed, dumfounded wife; but Mrs. Cobb had yet more to say.

"I tell you they're rich — them Denbys be — rich as mud; and as for pokin' you off with a measly ten thousand dollars, they shan't — and you with a baby ter try ter bring up and edyercate. The idea of your standin' for a separation with only ten thousand —"

"Separation!" interrupted Helen indignantly, as soon as she could find her voice. "It is n't a separation. Why, we never thought of such a thing; — not for — for *always*, the way you mean it."

"What is it, then?"

"Why, it's just a — a playday," stammered Helen, still trying to cling to the remnant of her secret. "He *said* it was a playday — that I was to go off and have a good time with Baby."

"If it's just a playday, why did n't he give it to you ter take it *tergether*, then? Tell me that!"

"Why, he — he's going with his father."

"You bet he is," retorted Mrs. Cobb grimly. "And he's goin' ter keep with his father, too."

"What do you mean?" Helen's lips were very white.

Mrs. Cobb gave an impatient gesture.

"Look a-here, child, do you think I'm blind? Don't ye s'pose I know how you folks have been

gettin' along tergether? — or, rather, *not* gettin' along tergether? Don't ye s'pose I know how he acts as if you was n't the same breed o' cats with him?"

"Then you've seen — I mean, you think he's — ashamed of me?" faltered Helen.

"Think it! I *know* it," snapped Mrs. Cobb, ruthlessly freeing her mind, regardless of the very evident suffering on her listener's face; "and it's just made my blood boil. Time an' again I've thought of speakin' up an' tellin' ye I jest would n't stand it, if I was you. But I did n't. I ain't no hand ter butt in where it don't concern me. But ter see you so plumb fooled with that ten thousand dollars — I jest can't stand it no longer. I *had* ter speak up. Turnin' you off with a beggarly ten thousand dollars — and them with all that money! Bah!"

"But, Mrs. Cobb, maybe he's coming back," stammered Helen faintly, with white lips.

"Pshaw! So maybe the sun'll rise in the west termorrer," scoffed Mrs. Cobb; "but I ain't pullin' down my winder shades for it yet. No, he won't come back — ter *you*, Mis' Denby."

"But he — he don't say it's for — for all time."

" 'Course he don't. But, ye see, he thinks he's lettin' ye down easy — a-sendin' ye that big check, an' tellin' ye ter take a playday. He don't want ye ter suspect, yet, an' make a fuss. He's countin' on bein' miles away when ye *do* wake up an' start somethin'. That's why I'm a-talkin' to ye now — ter

put ye wise ter things. I ain't goin' ter stand by an' see you bamboozled. Now do you go an' put on your things an' march up there straight. I'll take care of the baby, an' be glad to, if you don't want ter leave her with Bridget."

"*I go up there?*" Helen's voice was full of dismayed protest.

"Sure! You brace right up to 'em, an' tell 'em you've caught on ter their little scheme, and you ain't goin' ter stand for no such nonsense. If he wants ter git rid of you an' the baby, all well an' good. That is, I'm takin' it for granted that you would n't fight it — the divorce, I mean."

"*Divorce!*" almost shrieked Helen.

"But that he's got ter treat ye fair and square, an' give ye somewheres near what's due ye," went on Mrs. Cobb, without apparently noticing Helen's horrified exclamation. "Now don't cry; and, above all things, don't let 'em think they've scared ye. Just brace right up an' tell 'em what's what."

"Oh, but Mrs. Cobb, I — I —" With a choking sob and a hysterical shake of her head, Helen turned and fled down the hall to her own door. Once inside her apartment she stumbled over to the crib and caught the sleeping Dorothy Elizabeth into her arms.

"Oh, Baby, Baby, it's all over — all over," she moaned. "I can't ever be a daintily gowned wife welcoming him to a well-kept home now. Never — never! I can't welcome him at all. He is n't coming

back. He does n't *want* to come back. He's ashamed of us, Baby, — *ashamed of us!*"

Dorothy Elizabeth, roused from her nap and convulsively clutched in a pair of nervous hands, began to whimper restlessly.

"No, no, Baby, not of you," sobbed Helen, rocking the child back and forth in her arms. "It was me — just me he was ashamed of. What shall I do, what *shall* I do?"

"And I thought it was just as he said," she went on chokingly, after a moment's pause. "I thought it was a vacation he wanted us to take, 'cause we — we got on each other's nerves. But it was n't, Baby, — it was n't; and I see it now. He's ashamed of me. He's always been ashamed of me, 'way back when Dr. Gleason first came — he was ashamed of me then, Baby. He was. I know he was. And now he wants to get away — quite away, and never come back. And he calls it a *vacation!* And he says *I'm* to have one, too, and I must tell him all about it when he comes down next week. Maybe he thinks I will. *Maybe he thinks I will!*

"We won't be here, Baby, — we won't! We'll go somewhere — somewhere — anywhere! — before he gets here," she raved, burying her face in the baby's neck and sobbing hysterically.

Once again Helen passed a sleepless night. Never questioning now Mrs. Cobb's interpretation of her husband's conduct, there remained only a decision as to her own course of action. That she could not

be there when her husband came to make ready for his journey, she was convinced. She told herself fiercely that she would take herself and the baby away — quite away out of his sight. He should not be shamed again by the sight of her. But she knew in her heart that she was fleeing because she dared not go through that last meeting with her husband, lest she should break down. And she did not want to break down. If Burke did not want *her*, was it likely she was going to cry and whine, and let him know that she *did* want him? Certainly not!

Helen's lips came together in a thin, straight line, in spite of her trembling chin. Between her hurt love and her wounded pride, Helen was in just that state of hysterics and heroics to do almost anything — except something sane and sober.

First, to get away. On that she was determined. But where to go — that was the question. As for going back to the old home town — as Burke had suggested — *that* she would not do — now. Did they think, then, that she was going back there among her old friends to be laughed at, and gibed at? What if she did have ten thousand dollars to spend on frills and finery to dazzle their eyes? How long would it be before the whole town found out, as had Mrs. Cobb, that that ten thousand dollars was the price Burke Denby had paid for his freedom from the wife he was ashamed of? Never! She would not go there. But where could she go?

It was then that a plan came to her — a plan so

wild and dazzling that even her frenzied aspiration scouted it at first as impossible. But it came again and again; and before long her fancy was playing with it, and turning it about with a wistful "Of course, if I could!" which in time became a hesitating "And maybe, after all, I *could* do it," only to settle at last into a breathlessly triumphant "I will!"

After that things moved very swiftly in the little Denby flat. It was Saturday morning, and there was no time to lose.

First, Helen gathered all the cash she had in the house, not forgetting the baby's bank (which yielded the biggest sum of all), and counted it. She had nineteen dollars and seventeen cents. Then she rummaged among her husband's letters and papers until she found a letter from Dr. Gleason bearing his Boston address. Next, with Bridget to help her, she flung into her trunk everything belonging to herself and the baby that it was possible to crowd in, save the garments laid out to wear. By three o'clock Bridget was paid and dismissed, and Helen, with Dorothy Elizabeth, was waiting for the carriage to take them to the railroad station.

With the same tearless exaltation that had carried her through the prodigious tasks of the morning, Helen picked up her bag and Dorothy Elizabeth, and followed her trunk down the stairs and out to the street. She gave not one backward glance to the little home, and she carefully avoided anything but an airy "Good-bye" to the watching Mrs. Cobb in

the window on the other side. Not until the wheels began to turn, and the journey was really begun, did Helen's tearless exaltation become the frightened anxiety of one who finds herself adrift on an uncharted sea.

Then Helen began to cry.

CHAPTER XI

IN QUEST OF THE STARS

In a roomy old house on Beacon Hill Dr. Frank Gleason made his home with his sister, Mrs. Ellery Thayer. The family were at their North Shore cottage, however, and only the doctor was at home on the night that Hawkins, the Thayers' old family butler, appeared at the library door with the somewhat disconcerting information that a young person with a baby and a bag was at the door and wished to speak to Dr. Gleason.

The doctor looked up in surprise.

"Me?" he questioned. "A woman? She must mean Mrs. Thayer."

"She said you, sir. And she is n't a patient. I asked her, thinking she might have made a mistake and took you for a real doctor what practices. She said she did n't want doctoring. She wanted you. She's a young person I never saw before, sir."

"But, good Heavens, man, it's after eleven o'clock!"

"Yes, sir." On the manservant's face was an expression of lively curiosity and disapproval, mingled with a subdued but unholy mirth which was not lost on the doctor, and which particularly exasperated him.

"What in thunder can a woman with a baby want

of me at this time of — What's her name?" demanded the doctor.

"She did n't say, sir."

"Well, go ask her."

The butler coughed slightly, but made no move to leave the room.

"I did ask her, sir. She declined to give it."

"Declined to — Well, I like her impertinence."

"Yes, sir. She said you'd" — the servant's voice faltered and swerved ever so slightly from its well-trained impassiveness — "er — understand, sir."

"She said I'd — the deuce she did!" exploded the doctor under his breath, flushing an angry red and leaping to his feet. "Did n't you tell her Mrs. Thayer was gone?" he demanded at last, wheeling savagely.

"I did, sir, and —"

"Well?"

"She said she was glad; that she wanted only you, anyway."

"*Wanted only* —! Comes here at this time of night with a bag and a baby, refuses to give her name, and says I'll understand!" snarled the doctor. "Oh, come, Hawkins, this is some colossal mistake, or a fool hoax, or — What kind of looking specimen is she?"

Hawkins, who had known the doctor from his knickerbocker days, was guilty of a slow grin.

"She's a — a very good looker, sir."

"Oh, she is! Well — er, tell her I can't possibly see her; that I've gone to bed — away — sick —

something! Anything! Tell her she'll have to see Mrs. Thayer."

"Yes, sir." Still the man made no move to go. "She — er — beg pardon, sir — but she'll be that cut up, I fear, sir. You see, she's been cryin'. And she's young — very young."

"Crying!"

"Yes, sir. And she was that powerful anxious to see you, sir, I had hard work to keep her from coming *with* me. I did, sir. She's in the hall. And — it's raining outside, sir."

"Oh, good Heavens! Well, bring her in," capitulated the doctor in obvious desperation.

"Yes, sir." This time the words were scarcely out of his mouth before the old man was gone. In an incredibly short time he was back with a flushed-faced, agitated young woman carrying a sleeping child in her arms.

At sight of her, the doctor, who had plainly braced himself behind a most forbidding aspect, leaped forward with a low cry and a complete change of manner.

"*Mrs. Denby!*" he gasped. But instantly he fell back; for the young woman, for all the world like a tenpenny-dreadful stage heroine, hissed out a tragic "Sh-h! I don't want anybody to know my name!" with a cautious glance toward the none-too-rapidly disappearing Hawkins.

"But what does this mean?" demanded Frank Gleason, when he could find words. "Where's Burke?"

"He's left me."

"Left you! Impossible!"

"Yes." She drew in her breath convulsively. "He says it's only to Alaska with his father; but that's just to let me down easy."

"Oh, but, Mrs. Denby —"

"You need n't try to make me think any different," she interposed wearily, sinking into the chair the doctor placed for her; " 'cause you can't. I've been over everything you could say. All the way down here I did n't have anything to do only just to think and think. And I see now — such lots of things that I never saw before."

"But, why — how do you know — what made you think he has — left you?" stammered the doctor.

"Because he's ashamed of me; and —"

"Oh, Mrs. Denby!"

"You don't have to say anything about that, either," said Mrs. Denby very quietly. And before the dumb agony in the eyes turned full upon him, he fell silent.

"There ain't any question as to what *has* been done; it's just what I'm *going* to *do*," she went on wearily again. "He sent me ten thousand dollars — Burke's father did; and —"

"John Denby sent you ten thousand dollars!" exploded the doctor, sitting erect.

"Yes; a check. I've got it here. He sent it for a playday, you know," nodded Mrs. Denby, shifting the weight of the heavy baby in her arms. "And — and that's why I came to you."

"To — to me," stammered the doctor, growing suddenly alertly miserable and nervous again. "A — a playday! But I — I — that is — how —"

"Oh, I'm not going to take the playday. I could n't even *think* play — now," she choked. "It's —" Then in a breathless burst it came. "Doctor, you can — you *will* help me, won't you? — to learn to stand and walk and talk and eat soup and wear the right clothes and finger nails and hair, you know, and not say the wrong things, and everything the way Burke's friends do — you and all the rest of them — *you* know, so *I* can be swell and grand, too, and he won't be ashamed of me! And *is* ten thousand dollars enough to pay — for learning all that?"

From sheer inability to speak, the man could only fall back in his chair and stare dumbly.

"Please, *please* don't look at me like that," besought the young woman frenziedly. "It's just as if you said you *could n't* help me. But you can! I know you can. And I can *do* it. I know that, too. I read it in a book, once, about a girl who — who was like me. And she went away and got perfectly grand clothes, and learning, and all; and then she came back; and he — he did n't know her at first — her husband, and he fell in love with her all over again. And she did n't have near so much money as I've got. Doctor, you *will* help me?"

The doctor, with his shocked, amazed eyes on the piteously pleading face opposite, threw up his hands in despair.

"But I — you — Burke — Oh, Heavens, my dear lady! How utterly, utterly impossible this all is! Come, come, what am I thinking of? — and you with not even your hat off yet! And that child! I'll call Hawkins at once. He and his wife are all there are left here, just now, — my sister's at the beach. But they'll make you and little Miss Dorothy Elizabeth here comfortable for the night. Then, to-morrow, after a good sleep, we'll — we'll fix it all up. I'll get Burke on the long distance, and —"

"Dr. Gleason," interrupted Helen Denby, with a calmness that would have deceived him had he not seen her eyes, "my husband is n't worrying about me. He thinks I'm at home now. When he finds I'm not, he'll think I've gone to my old home town where he *told* me to go for a visit. He won't worry then. So that's all right. Don't you see? He's sent me away — *sent* me. If you tell him now that I am here, I will walk right straight out of that door, and neither you nor him nor anybody else I know shall ever see me again."

"Oh, come, come," protested the doctor, again helplessly.

Once more Helen interrupted.

"Doctor, why can't you be straight with me?" she pleaded. "I had to come to you. There was n't anybody else I *could* go to. And there is n't any other way out of it — but this. I tell you I've been doing some *thinking*. All the way down here it's been just think, think, think."

The doctor wet his lips.

"But, if — if Burke knew —"

"Look a-here," cut in Helen resolutely, "you've been to our house quite a lot since Burke and me was married. You think I made Burke real happy, don't you?"

There was no answer.

"You might just as well say the words with your lips, Doctor. Your face has said them," observed Helen, a little dryly.

"Well — no, then; — but I feel like a brute to say it."

"You need n't. I made you. Besides, I'm glad to have you say it. We're right out in the open, now, and maybe we can get somewhere. Look a-here, do you know? — for the first time in my life to-day I was sorry for John Denby. I was! I got to thinking, with Dorothy Elizabeth all safe and snug in my arms, how, by and by, she'd be a little girl, and then a young lady. And she was so sweet and pretty, and — and I *loved* her so! And I got to thinking how *I'd* feel if somebody took her away from me the way I took Burke away from his father, and married her when I did n't want her to, any more 'n Burke's father wanted *him* to; and I — I could see then how he must have felt, worshiping Burke as he did. I know — I used to see them together, when I was nurse there with Mrs. Allen's children. I never saw a father and son so much like — chums. He doted on Burke. I know now how he felt. And — and

it's turned out the way he said. I hain't been the one for Burke at all. I've — I've dragged him down."

"Mrs. Denby, please —" begged the doctor.

But she paused only long enough to shake her head.

"Yes, I have. I know. I've been thinking it all over — the life we've led together, and what he might have had, if he had n't had — if it had n't been for me. And that's why, now, I want to see if — if I can't learn how to — to make him not ashamed of me. And it ain't for me, only, it's for Dorothy Elizabeth. I want to teach her. It's bad enough to have him ashamed of me; but I — I just could n't stand it if he should ever be — be ashamed of — *her*. And now — won't you help me, please? Remember, Burke don't *want* me at home, now, so I'm not displeasing him. *Won't* you help me? It's my only — chance!"

The doctor sprang to his feet. His eyes were moist and his voice shook when he spoke.

"Help you! I'll help you to — to bring down the moon and all the stars, if you say the word! Mrs. Denby, you're a — a little brick, and there's no end to the way I respect and admire you. Of course I'll help you — somehow. Though *how* I have n't the faintest idea. Meanwhile you must get some rest. As I told you, my sister is at the beach, and there are only Hawkins and his wife here to keep the house open. But they'll make you comfortable for the

night, and we'll see to-morrow what can be done. We'll have some kind of a plan," he finished, as he crossed the room to ring the bell.

"Oh, thank you, thank you!" breathed Helen. "But, remember, please, I'm not Mrs. Denby. I'm Mrs. Darling — my mother's maiden name," she begged in a panic, as the doctor touched the bell.

True to his promise, Frank Gleason had a plan, of a sort, ready by morning. He told it at the breakfast table.

"I'm going to take you to my sister, provided, of course, that you agree," he announced. "Five minutes' talk with her on this matter will be worth five years' with me. I should n't wonder if she kept you herself, — for a time, with her. And you could n't be in a better place. Perhaps you'll be willing to help her with the children — and she'll be glad of that, I know."

"But — my money — can't I pay — money?" faltered Helen.

He shook his head.

"Not if we can help it. Your money you'll need later for Miss Dorothy — unless you are willing to make yourself known to your husband sooner than you seem now to be willing to. We'll invest it in something safe and solid, and it'll bring you in a few hundred a year. You'll have that to spend; and that will go quite a way — under some circumstances."

"But I — I want to — to learn things, you know," stammered Helen; "how to be — be —"

"You'll learn — lots of things, if you live with my sister," remarked the doctor significantly.

"Oh!" smiled Helen, with a sigh of relief and content.

The doctor sighed, too, — though not at all with either relief or content. To the doctor, the task before him loomed as absurd and unreal as if it were, indeed, the pulling-down of the stars and the moon — the carrying-out of his extravagant promise of the night before.

CHAPTER XII

THE TRAIL OF THE INK

BURKE DENBY was well pleased with the letter that he had sent to his wife, enclosing the ten-thousand-dollar check. He felt that it was both conclusive and diplomatic; and he believed that it carried a frankness that would prove to be disarming. He had every confidence that Helen would eventually (if not at once) recognize its logic and reasonableness, and follow its suggestions. With a light heart, therefore, he gave himself up to the enjoyment of the day with his father. By Saturday, however, a lively curiosity began to assail him as to just how Helen did take the note, after all. There also came unpleasantly to him a recurrence of the uncomfortable feeling that his abrupt departure from home Thursday night had been neither brave nor kind, and, in fact, hardly decent, under the circumstances. He decided that he would, when he saw Helen, really quite humble himself and apologize roundly. It was no more than her due, poor girl!

By Sunday, between his curiosity and his uneasy remorse, he was too nervous really to enjoy anything to the full; but he sternly adhered to his original plan of not going down to the Dale Street flat before Monday, believing, in his heart, that nothing could do so much good to both of them, under the

circumstances, as a few days of thought apart from each other. Monday, however, found him headed for Dale Street; but in an hour he was back at Elm Hill. He was plainly very angry.

"She's gone," he announced, with a brevity more eloquent of his state of mind than a flood of words would have been.

"Gone! Where?"

"Home — to spend that ten thousand dollars, of course. She left this."

With a frown John Denby took the proffered bit of paper upon which had been scrawled: —

I hope you'll enjoy your playday as much as I shall mine. Address me at Wenton — if you care to write.

HELEN.

"Where did you find this?"

"On my chiffonier. I did n't think that — of Helen."

"And there was nothing to show *when* she left?"

"Nothing — except that the apartment was in spick-and-span order from end to end; and *that* must have taken *some* time to accomplish."

"But perhaps the neighbors would —"

"There's no one she knows but Mrs. Cobb," interrupted Burke, with an impatient gesture. "Do you suppose I'm going to her and whimper, 'My wife's gone. Please, do you know when she went?' Not much! I saw her — the dear creature! And one glance at her face showed that she was dying to be asked. But I did n't afford her that satisfaction. I

gave her a particularly blithe 'Good-morning,' and then walked away as if I'd *known* I was coming home to an empty house all the time. But, I repeat, I'm disappointed. I did n't think this of Helen — running off like this!"

"You think she was angry, then, at your letter?"

"Of course she was — at that, and at the way I left her the other night. I *was* a bit of a cad there, I'll admit; but that does n't excuse her for doing a trick like this. I wrote her a good letter, and you sent her a very generous check; and I told her I was coming to-day to pick up my traps and say good-bye. She did n't care to see me — that's all. But she might have had some thought that I'd like to see my daughter before I go. If there was time I'd run up there. But it's out of the question — with only to-morrow before we start."

"Wenton is her home town, I suppose."

"Yes. She left there, you know, two years before I saw her. Her father died and then her mother; and she had to look out for herself. I shall write, of course, and send it up before I go. And I shall try to write decently; but I will own up, father, I'm mad clear through."

"Too bad, too bad!" John Denby frowned and shook his head again. "I must confess, Burke, that I, too, did n't quite think this — of Helen."

"I don't know her street address, of course." Burke was on his feet, pacing back and forth. "But that is n't necessary. It's a small town — I know that.

I told her I thought she'd like the hotel best; but she may prefer to go to some friend's home. However, that does n't signify. She'll get it all right, if I direct it simply to Wenton. But I can't have a reply before I leave. There is n't time, even if she deigned to write — which I doubt, in her present evident frame of mind. Pleasant, is n't it? Makes me feel real happy to start off with, to-morrow!"

"No, of course it does n't," admitted John Denby, with a sigh. "But, come, Burke," — his eyes grew wistful, — "don't let this silly whim of Helen's spoil everything. Fretting never did help anything, and perhaps, after all, it's the best thing that could have happened. A meeting between you, in Helen's present temper, could have resulted only in unhappiness. Obviously Helen is piqued and angry at your suggesting a separation for a time. She determined to give it to you — but to give it to you a little sooner than you wanted. That's her way of getting back at you. That's all. Let her alone. She'll come to her senses in time. Oh, *write*, of course," he hastened to add, in answer to the expression on his son's face. "But don't expect a reply too soon. You must remember you gave Helen a pretty big blow to her pride. I *wish* she had looked at the matter sensibly, of course; but probably that was too much to expect."

"I'm afraid it was — of —" Biting his lips, Burke pulled himself up sharply. "I'll go and write my letter," he finished wearily, instead.

And John Denby echoed the long sigh he drew.

It was January when John Denby and his son returned from their Alaskan trip. The long and rather serious illness of John Denby in November, and the necessary slowness of their journeying thereafter, had caused a series of delays very trying to both father and son.

To neither John Denby nor Burke had the trip been an entire success. Burke, in spite of his joy at being with his father and his delight in the traveling itself, could not get away from the shadow of an upturned bottle of ink in a Dale Street flat. At times, with all the old boyish enthusiasm and lightness of heart, he entered into whatever came; but underneath it all, and forever cropping uppermost, was a surge of anger, a bitterness of heart.

Not once, through the entire trip, had Burke heard from his wife. Their mail, of course, had been infrequent and irregular; but, from time to time, a batch of letters would be found waiting for them, and always, with feverish eagerness, Burke had scanned the envelopes for a sight of Helen's familiar scrawl. He had never found it, and he was very angry thereat. He was not worried or frightened. Any Denby of the Dalton Denbys was too well known not to have any vital information concerning him or her communicated to the family headquarters. If anything had happened to either Helen or the child, he would have known of it, of course, through Brett. This silence could mean, therefore, but one thing: Helen's own wish that he should not hear. He felt

that he had a right to be angry. He pictured Helen happy, gay in her new finery, queening it over her old school friends in Wenton, and nursing wrath and resentment against himself (else why did she not write?) — and the picture did not please him.

He had suggested separation (for a time), to be sure; but he had not suggested total annihilation of all intercourse! If she did not care to say anything for herself, she might, at least, be decent enough to let him hear as to the welfare of his child, he reasoned indignantly.

On one course of action he was determined. As soon as he returned home he would go to Helen and have it out with her. If she *wished* to carry to such absurd lengths her unreasonable pique at his perfectly reasonable suggestion, he wanted to know it at once, and not live along this way!

Under these circumstances it is not strange, perhaps, that the trip, for Burke, was not an unalloyed joy; and the delays, in addition to giving him no little anxiety for his father, fretted him almost beyond endurance.

As to John Denby — he, too, could not get away from the shadow of an upturned bottle of ink. Besides suffering the reflection of its effect on his son, in that son's moodiness and frequent lack of enthusiasm, he had no small amount of it on his own account.

Burke's word-picture of that evening's catastrophe had been a vivid one; and John Denby could not forget it. He realized that it meant much in many

ways. The fact that it had been followed by Helen's ominous silence did not lessen his uneasy questionings. He wondered if, after all, he had done the wise thing in bringing about this temporary separation. He still believed, in his heart, that he had. But he did not seem to find much happiness in that belief. In spite of his supreme joy and content in his son's companionship, he found himself many a time almost wishing the trip were over. And the delays at the end were fully as great a source of annoyance to himself as they were to his son. He, as well as Burke, therefore, heaved a long sigh of relief as the train drew into the Dalton station, bringing into view the old Denby family carriage (John Denby did not care for motor cars), with old Horace on the box, and with Brett near by, plainly waiting to extend a welcoming hand. Brett's face was white and a little strained-looking. John Denby, noticing it through the car window, remarked to his son: —

"Guess Brett will be glad to see us. He looks tired. Overworked, I fear. Faithful fellow — that, Burke! We owe him our trip, anyway. But who supposed it was going to prolong itself away into January like this?"

"Who did, indeed?" murmured Burke, as he followed his father from the car.

Burke Denby had not been at home half an hour, when, his face drawn and ashen, he strode into the library where his father was sitting before the fire.

"Father, Helen has not been at Wenton at all," he said in the tragically constrained voice of a man who is desperately trying to keep himself from exploding into ravings and denunciations.

John Denby came erect in his chair.

"*Not been there* — What do you mean? How do you know?"

"Brett. I found these upstairs in my room — — *every letter I've written her* — even the first one from here before I left — returned unopened, marked 'unclaimed, address unknown,' together with a letter from Brett in explanation. I've just been talking with him on the 'phone, too."

"So that's it — why he looked so at the station! What did he say? Why did n't he let you know before?"

"He says it was a long time before the first letter came back. He knew we were away up in the mountains, and would be very likely started for home before he could reach us with it, anyway. And there would n't be a thing we could do — up there, except to come home; and we'd already be doing that, anyway. And this would only worry us, and trouble us, and make our return trip a horror — without helping a bit."

"Quite right. Brett is always right," nodded John Denby.

"Then, of course, came the delay, your sickness, and all. Of course he would n't let us know then — when we *could n't* come. By that time other letters

I had written on the way out began to come back from Wenton. (I always used my own envelopes with the Dalton address in the corner, so of course they all showed up here in time.) When the second and third came he knew it was n't a mistake. He'd been hoping the first one was, somehow, he said."

"Yes, yes, I see. And of course it might have been. But what did he do? Did n't he do — anything?"

"Yes. First, he said, he kept his own counsel — here in town. He knew we'd want to avoid all gossip and publicity."

"Of course!"

"He put the thing into the hands of a private detective whom he could trust; and he went himself to Wenton — for a vacation, apparently."

"Good old Brett! Wise, as usual. What did he find?"

"Nothing — except that she was not there, and had n't been there since she left some years ago, soon after her mother's death. He says he's positive of that. So he had to come back no wiser than he went."

"But — the detective."

"Very little there. Still, there was something. He traced her to Boston."

"*Boston!*"

"Yes."

"What friends has she in Boston?"

"None, so far as I know. I never heard her mention knowing a soul there. Still, I believe she had a — a position there with some one, before she went to Aunt Eunice; but I don't know who it was."

"There's Gleason — she knows him."

Burke gave his father a glance from scornful eyes.

"My best friend! She'd be apt to go to him, would n't she, if she were running away from me? Besides, we've had three or four letters from him since we've been gone. Don't you suppose he'd tell us of it, if she'd gone to him?"

"Yes, yes, of course," frowned John Denby, biting his lips. "It's only that I was trying to get hold of some one — or something. Think of it — that child alone in Boston, and — no friends! Of course she had money — that is, I suppose she cashed it — that check?" John Denby turned with a start.

"Oh, yes. I asked Brett about that. I hoped maybe there'd be a clue there, if she got somebody to cash it for her. But there was nothing. She got the money herself, at the bank here, not long after we went. So she must have come back for a time, anyway. Brett says Spawlding, at the bank, knew her, of course, and so there was no question as to identification. Still it was so large a one that he telephoned to Brett, before he paid it, asking if it were all right — you being away. Brett evidently knew you had given her such a check —"

"Yes, I had told him," nodded John Denby.

"So he said yes, it was. He says he supposed she had come down from Wenton to get it cashed, and that she would leave the bulk of it there in the bank to her credit. Anyway, all he could do was to assure

Spawlding that you had given her such a check just before you went away."

"Yes, yes, I see," nodded John Denby again.

"She did n't leave any of the money, however. She took it all with her."

"Took it *all* — ten thousand dollars!"

"Yes. The detective, of course, is still working on the case. He got to Boston, but there he's up against a blank wall. He's run a fine-tooth comb through all sorts of public and private institutions in Boston and vicinity without avail. He's made a thorough search at the railroad station. He can't find a person who has any recollection of a young woman and child answering their description, arriving on that date, who seemed to be troubled or in doubt where to go. He questioned the matron, ticket-men, cabbies, policemen — everybody. Of course every one had seen plenty of young women with babies in their arms — young women who had the hair and eyes and general appearance of Helen, and who were anxious and fretted. (They said young women with babies were apt to be anxious and fretted.) But they did n't remember one who asked frantic questions as to what to do, and where to go, and all that — acting as we think Helen would have acted, alone in a strange city."

"Poor child, poor child!" groaned John Denby. "Where can —"

But his son interrupted sternly.

"I don't *know* where she is, of course. But don't

be too sure it is 'poor child' with her, dad. She's doing this thing because she *wants* to do it. Don't forget that. Did n't she purposely mislead us by that note she left on my chiffonier? She did n't say she *had* gone to Wenton, but she let me think she had. 'Address me at Wenton, if you care to write,' she said. And don't forget that she also said: 'I hope you'll enjoy your playday as much as I shall mine.' Don't you worry about Helen. She's taken my child and your ten thousand dollars, and she's off somewhere, having a good time; — and Helen could have a good time — on ten thousand dollars! Incidentally she's also punishing us. She means to give us a good scare. She's waiting till we get home, and till the money's gone. Then she'll let herself be found."

"Oh, come, come, Burke, are n't you just a little bit — harsh?" remonstrated John Denby.

"I don't think so. She deserves — something for taking that child away like this. Honestly, as my temper is now, if it was n't for the baby, I should feel almost like saying that I hoped she would n't ever come back. I don't want to see her. But, of course, with the baby, that's another matter."

"I should say so!" exclaimed John Denby emphatically.

"Yes; but, see here, dad! Helen knew where she was going. She's gone to friends. Would n't she have left some trace in that station if she'd been frightened and uncertain where to go? Brett says the detective found one cabby who remembered taking just such

a young woman and child from an evening train at about that time. He did n't recollect where he took her, and he could n't say as to whether she had been crying, or not; but he's positive she directed him where to go without a moment's hesitation. If that was Helen, she knew where she was going all right."

John Denby frowned and did not answer. His eyes were troubled.

"But perhaps here — at the flat —" he began, after a time.

"The detective tried that. He went as a student, or something, and managed to hire a room of Mrs. Cobb. He became very friendly and chatty, and showed interest in all the neighbors, not forgetting the vacant flat on the same floor. But he did n't learn — much."

"But he learned — something?"

An angry red mounted to Burke's forehead.

"Oh, yes; he learned that it belonged to a poor little woman whose husband was as rich as mud, but quite the meanest thing alive, in that he'd tried to buy her off with ten thousand dollars, because he was ashamed of her! Just about what I should think would come from a woman of Mrs. Cobb's mentality!"

"Then she knew about the ten-thousand-dollar check?"

"Apparently. But she did n't know Helen had gone to Boston. The detective found out that. She told him she believed she'd gone back home to her

folks. So Helen evidently did not confide in her — or perhaps she intentionally misled her, as she did us."

"I see, I see," sighed John Denby.

For a minute the angry, perplexed, baffled young husband marched back and forth, back and forth, in the great, silent room. Then, abruptly, he stopped short, and faced his father.

"I shall try to find her, of course, — though I think she'll let us hear from her of her own accord, pretty soon, now. But I shan't wait for that. First I shall go to Aunt Eunice and see if she knows the names of any of the people with whom Helen used to live, before she came to her. Then, whatever clues I find I shall endeavor to follow to the end. Meanwhile, so far as Dalton is concerned, — *my wife is out of town.* That's all. It's no one's business. The matter will be hauled over every dinner-table and rolled under the tongue of every old tabby in town. But they can only surmise and suspect. They can't *know* anything about it. And we'll be mighty careful that they don't. Brett — bless him! — has been the soul of discretion. We'll see that we follow suit. *My wife is out of town!* That's all!" And he turned and flung himself from the room.

As soon as possible Burke Denby went to his Aunt Eunice and told her his sorry tale. From her he obtained one or two names, and — what he eagerly grasped at — an address in Boston. Each of these clues he followed assiduously, only to find that it led nowhere. Angrier, but no wiser, he went back home.

The detective, too, reported no progress. And as the days became weeks, and the weeks a month, with no word of Helen, Burke settled into a bitterness of wrath and resentment that would not brook the mention of Helen's name in his presence.

Burke was feeling very much abused these days. He was, indeed, thinking of himself and pitying himself almost constantly. The woman to whom he had given his name (and for whom he had sacrificed so much) had made that name a byword and a laughing stock in his native town. He was neither bachelor nor husband. He was not even a widower, but a nondescript thing to be pointed out as a sort of monster. Even his child was taken away from him; and was doubtless being brought up to hate him — Burke forgot that Dorothy Elizabeth was as yet but slightly over two years old.

As for Helen's side of the matter — Burke was too busy polishing his own shield of defense to give any consideration to hers. When he thought of his wife, it was usually only to say bitterly to himself: "Humph! When that ten thousand dollars is gone we'll hear from her all right!" And he was not worrying at all about her comfort — with ten thousand dollars to spend.

"She knows where *she* is, and she knows where *I* am," he would declare fiercely to himself. "When she gets good and ready she'll come — and not until then, evidently!"

In March a line from Dr. Gleason said that he

would be in town a day or two, and would drop in to see them.

With the letter in his hand, Burke went to his father.

"Gleason's coming Friday," he announced tersely.

"Well?"

"We've got to settle on what to tell him."

"About —"

"Helen — yes. Of course — he'll have to know something; but — I shall tell him mighty little." Burke's lips snapped together in the grim manner that was becoming habitual with him.

Gleason came on Friday. There was an odd constraint in his manner. At the same time there was a nervous wistfulness that was almost an appeal. Yet he was making, obviously, a great effort to appear as usual.

Not until Burke found himself alone with his guest did he speak of his wife. Then he said: —

"You know, of course, that Helen has — er — that she is not here."

"Yes." There was a subdued excitement in the doctor's voice.

"Of course! Everybody knows that, I suppose," retorted Burke bitterly. He hesitated, then went on, with manifest effort: "If you don't mind, old fellow, we'll leave it — right there. There's really nothing that I care to say."

A look of keen disappointment crossed the doctor's face.

"But, Burke, if you knew that your wife —" began the doctor imploringly.

"There are no 'ifs' about it," interrupted Burke, with stern implacability. "Helen knows very well where I am, and — she is n't here. That's enough for me."

"But, my dear boy —" pleaded the doctor again.

"Gleason, please, I'd rather not talk about it," interrupted Burke Denby decidedly. And the doctor, in the face of the stern uncompromisingness of the man before him, and of his own solemn, but hard-wrung promise, given to a no less uncompromising little woman whom he had left only the day before, was forced to drop the matter. His face, however, still carried its look of troubled disappointment. And he steadfastly refused to remain at the house even for a meal — a most extraordinary proceeding for him.

"He's angry, and he's angry with me," muttered Burke Denby to himself, his eyes moodily fixed on the doctor's hurrying figure as it disappeared down the street. "He wanted to preach and plead, and tell me my 'duty.' As if I did n't know my own business best myself! Bah! A fig for his 'ifs' and 'buts'!"

CHAPTER XIII

A WOMAN'S WON'T

Two days after his visit to Dalton, Frank Gleason dropped himself into a low chair in his sister's private sitting-room in the Beacon Hill house.

"Well?" prompted Mrs. Thayer, voice and manner impatiently eager.

"Nothing."

"Nothing! But there must have been something!"

"There was n't a thing — that will help."

"But, are n't they frightened — anxious — anything? Don't they *care* where she is?"

"Oh, yes; they care very much," smiled the doctor wearily; "but not in the way that is going to help any. I could n't get *anything* out of Burke, and I did n't get much more out of his father. But I did a little."

"They don't know, of course, that she's here?"

"Heavens, I hope not! — under the circumstances. But I felt all kinds of a knave and a fool and a traitor. I got away as soon as possible. I could n't stay. I hoped to get something — anything — that I could use for a cudgel over Helen, to get her to go back, you know. But I could n't get a thing. However, I shall keep on urging, of course."

"But what *did* they say?"

"Burke said nothing, practically. Nor would he

let me say anything. He is very angry (his father told me that), and very bitter."

"But is n't he frightened, or worried?"

"Not according to his father. It seems they have had a detective on the case, and have traced her to Boston. There the trail ends. But they have found out enough to feel satisfied that no evil has befallen her. Burke argues that Helen is staying somewhere (with friends, he believes) because she wants to. Such being the case he does n't want her back until she gets good and ready to come. He does want the baby. John Denby told me, in fact, that he believed if Burke found them now, as he's feeling, he'd insist on a separation; and that the baby should be given to him."

"Given to him, indeed!" flashed Mrs. Thayer angrily. "And yet, in the face of that, you sit there and say you shall urge her to go back, of course."

Frank Gleason stirred uneasily.

"I know, Edith, but —"

"There is n't any question about it," interrupted Mrs. Thayer decidedly. "That poor child stays where she is now."

"Oh, but, Edith, this sort of thing can't go on forever, you know," remonstrated the doctor nervously, his forehead drawn into an anxious frown.

"I was n't talking about forever," returned the lady, with tranquil confidence. "I was talking about *now*, to-day, next week, next year, if it's necessary."

"*Next year!*"

"Certainly — if Burke Denby has n't come to his senses by that time. Why, Frank Gleason, don't you suppose I'd do anything, *everything*, to help that child keep her baby? She worships it. Besides, it's going to be the making of her."

"I know; but if they could be brought together — Burke and his wife, I mean — it seems as if — as if —" The man came to a helpless pause.

"Frank, see here," began Edith Thayer resolutely. "You know as well as I do that those two people have been wretched together for a year or more. They are not suited to each other. They were n't in the first place. To make matters worse, they were both nothing but petted, spoiled children, no more fit to take on the responsibilities of marriage than my Bess and Charlie would be. All their lives they'd had their own dolls and shotguns to do as they pleased with; and when it came to marrying and sharing everything, including their time and their tempers, they flew into bits — both of them."

"Yes, I know," sighed the man, still with a troubled frown.

"Well, they're apart now. Never mind who was to blame for it, or whether it was or was n't a wise move. It's done. They're apart. They've got a chance to think things over — to stand back and get a perspective, as it were. Helen thinks she can metamorphose herself into the perfect wife that Burke will love. Perhaps she can. Let us say she has one chance in a million of doing so; — well, I mean she

shall have that chance, especially as the alternative — that is, her going back home now — is sure to be nothing but utter wretchedness all round."

Frank Gleason shook his head.

"Yes, yes, very plausible — to *say*, of course. I see she's talked you over. She did me. I was ready to pull the moon down for her footstool that first night she came to me. I'm ready to do it now — when I'm with her. But away from her, with a chance to think, — it really is absurd, you know, when you come right down to it. Here are Burke and his father, my good friends, hunting the country over for Burke's wife and child. And here am I, harboring her and abetting her, and never opening my head. Really, it's the sort of thing that you'd say — er — could n't happen, you know."

"But it *is* happening; and so far as their finding her is concerned, you said yourself, long ago, that it was the safest hiding-place in the world, for they'd never think of looking in it. They've never been in the habit of coming here, and their friends don't know us. As for the servants, and the few of my friends who see her, she's merely Mrs. Darling. That's all. Besides, you're entirely leaving out of consideration Helen's own attitude in the matter. I have n't a doubt but that, if you did tell, she'd at least *attempt* to carry out her crazy threats of flight and oblivion. Really, Frank, so far as being a friend is concerned, you're being the truest friend, both to Burke and his father, and to Helen, by keeping her and protecting her

from herself and others — to say nothing of the real help I hope I'm being to her."

"I know, I know," sighed the man, thrusting his hands into his pockets, and scowling at the toe of his shoe. "You're a brick, Edith! It's been simply marvelous to me — the way you've taken hold. Even that first awful Sunday morning last July, when I showed you what I'd brought you, did n't quite bowl you over."

"It did almost," laughed Edith; "especially when she blurted out that alarming speech, after you'd told me who she was."

"What *did* she say? I don't remember."

"She said, tragically, frenziedly: 'Oh, Mrs. Thayer, you will help me, won't you? — to be swell and grand and *know* things, so's Burke won't be ashamed of me. And if you can't make *me* so, you will Baby, won't you? I'll do anything — everything you say. Oh, please say you will. I *know* you're Burke's kind of folks, just to look at you, and at this — the house, and all these swell fixings! You will, won't you? Oh, please say you will!' "

"Gorry! Did she say that — all that?"

"Every bit of it — and more, that I can't remember. You see, I could n't say anything — not anything, for a minute. And the more she said, the less I *could* say. Probably she saw something of the horror and dismay in my face, and that's what made her so frenzied in her appeal."

"No wonder you were struck dumb at her nerve

and at mine in asking you to take her in," laughed the doctor softly.

"Oh, but 't was for only a minute. I capitulated at once, first because of the baby — she was such a dear! — then because of the mother's love for it. I thought I'd seen devotion, Frank, but never have I seen it like hers."

"How is she doing, really, about — well, er — this private self-improvement association of hers?" The doctor's smile was eager and quizzical. "I've been away so much, and I've seen so little of her for months past — how *is* she doing?"

"Splendidly! She's a daily marvel to me, she's so patient and painstaking. Oh, of course, she has n't *learned* so very much — yet. But she's so alert and earnest, and she watches everything so! Indeed, if it were n't really so pitiful and so tragic, it would be perfectly funny and absurd. The things she does and says — the things she asks me to teach her! Feverishly and systematically she's set herself to becoming 'swell' and 'grand.'"

"Swell! Grand!"

"Oh, yes, I know," laughed the lady, answering his shuddering words and gesture. "And — we've nearly eliminated those expressions from our vocabulary now. Burke did n't like them either, she says."

"I can imagine not," observed the doctor dryly.

"Of course all the teaching in the world is n't going to accomplish the thing she wants," went on Mrs. Thayer, a little soberly. "I might teach her

till doomsday that clothes, jewels, grooming, and perfume don't make the lady; and unless she learns by intuition and absorption what *does* make the lady, she'll be little better off than she was before. But she puts me now through a daily catechism until sometimes I am nearly wild. 'Do ladies do this?' 'Do ladies do that?' she queries at every turn, so that I am almost ready to fly off into a veritable orgy of slang and silliness, just from sheer contrariety. I can tell you, Frank, this attempting to teach the intangible, evanescent thing I'm trying to teach Helen Denby is n't very easy. If you think it is, you try it yourself."

"Heaven forbid!" shrugged the man. "But I'll risk you, Edith. But, tell me — does she help you any, in any way? Do you think you can — keep her, for a while?"

"Keep her? Of course I shall keep her! Do you suppose I'd turn that child adrift now? Besides, she's a real help to me with the children. And I know — and she knows — that in helping me she is helping herself, and helping Dorothy Elizabeth — 'Betty' she calls her now. We're getting along beautifully. We —"

There came the sound of hurried steps, then the sudden wide flinging of the door, and the appearance of a breathless young woman.

"Oh, Mrs. Thayer, they said the doctor had come, and —" Helen Denby stopped short, her abashed eyes going from one to the other of the expressive

faces before her. "Oh, I — I beg your pardon," she faltered. "I had n't ought to have burst in like this. Ladies don't. You said yesterday that ladies never did. But I — I — doctor, you went to — to Dalton?" she appealed to the man.

"Yes, Mrs. Denby."

"And you saw — them? Burke and his father?"

"Yes."

"But, you did n't — you *did n't* tell them I was here?"

"Of course not! Did n't I promise you I would n't?"

Helen Denby relaxed visibly, and dropped herself into a low chair near by. The color came back to her face.

"I know; but I was so afraid they'd find out — some way."

"They did n't — from me."

She raised startled eyes to his face.

"You don't mean they *do* know where I am?"

"Oh, no. But — " The doctor stirred uneasily. "Mrs. Denby, don't you think — Won't you let me tell them where you are?"

"Do they want to know?"

"Yes. They are trying very hard to find you."

"Of course. But if they find me — what then? Does Burke — want me?"

The doctor flushed.

"Well, he — yes — that is, he — well, of course — "

"You don't have to say any more, doctor," interposed Helen Denby, smiling a little sadly.

The red deepened on the doctor's face.

"Well, of course, Burke is very angry and very bitter, just now," he explained defensively. "But if you two could be brought together —" He paused helplessly.

She shook her head.

"'T would be the same old story — only worse. I see so many things now that I never saw before. Even if he said right now that he wanted me, I would n't go back. I would n't dare to. 'T would n't be a day before he 'd be ashamed of me again. Maybe some time I'll learn —" She paused, her eyes wistfully fixed out the window. "But if I don't" — she turned almost frenziedly — "Betty will. Betty is going to be a lady from right now. Then some day I'll show her to him. He won't be ashamed of Betty. You see if he is!"

Again the doctor stirred uneasily.

"But, think! How can I go on from day to day and not let your husband know —"

Helen Denby sprang to her feet. The wild look of that first night of flight came into her eyes, but her voice, when she spoke, was very calm.

"Dr. Gleason," she began resolutely, "it's just as I told you before. Unless you'll promise not to tell Burke where I am, till I say the word, I shall take Betty and go — somewhere. I don't know where. But it'll be where you can't find me — any of you."

"Oh, come, come, my dear child —"

"Will you promise?"

"But just think how —"

"I *am* thinking!" choked Helen. "But *you* don't seem to be. *Can't* you see how I want to stay here? I've got a chance, maybe, to be like you and your sister, and all the rest of Burke's swell — I mean, like Burke's friends," she corrected, with a hot blush. "And, anyhow, Betty's got a chance. We've made a start. We've begun. And here you want to go and tip it all over by telling Burke. And there can't anything good happen, if Burke knows. Besides, did n't he say himself that we *needed* to have a vacation from each other? Now, won't you promise, please?"

With a despairing cry the doctor threw up his hands.

"Oh, good Heavens, yes! Of course I'll promise," he groaned. "I suspect you could make me promise to shave my head and dance the tango barefooted down Washington Street, if you set out to. Oh, yes, I'll promise. But I can tell you right now that I shall wake up in the dead of night and pinch myself to make sure I *have* promised," he finished with wrathful emphasis.

Helen laughed light-heartedly. She even tossed the doctor a playful glance as she turned to go.

"All right! I don't care a mite how much you pinch yourself," she declared. "You've promised — and that's all I care for!" And she left the room with buoyant step.

"You see," observed Mrs. Thayer significantly, as the door closed behind her.

"Yes, I see — so far," nodded Dr. Frank Gleason with a sigh. "But I do wish I could see — what the end is going to be."

"It is n't given to us to see ends," responded Mrs. Thayer sententiously. "We can only attend to the beginnings and make them right."

"Humph!" grunted her brother, with some asperity. "I'm not saying I like the beginning, in this case. Honestly, to speak plainly, my dear Edith, I consider this thing one big fool business, from beginning to end."

There was a moment's pause; then very quietly Mrs. Thayer asked: —

"Can you suggest, dear, all things considered, anything else for us to do than what we *are* doing?"

"No — confound it! And that's what's the matter," groaned Frank Gleason. "But that is n't saying that I *like* to play the fool."

"Well, I should n't worry. I'm not worrying," replied his sister, with an enigmatic smile.

"Maybe not. But I'm glad I'm going on that Arctic trip, and that it's just next month. I'd as soon not see much of the Denbys just now. Feel too much like the evil-eyed, double-dyed villain in a dime movie," growled the doctor, getting to his feet, and striding from the room.

CHAPTER XIV

AN UNDERSTUDY

Soon after the doctor started on his trip to the North the Thayers closed their Beacon Street home and went to their North Shore cottage. The move was made a little earlier than usual this year, a fact which pleased the children not a little and delighted Helen Denby especially.

"You see, I'm always so afraid in Boston," she explained to Mrs. Thayer, as the train pulled out of the North Station.

"Afraid?"

"That somewhere — on the street, or somewhere — I'll meet some one from Dalton, or somebody that knew — my husband."

Mrs. Thayer frowned slightly.

"Yes, I know. And there was danger, of course! But — Helen, that brings up exactly the subject that I'd been intending to speak to you about. Thus far — and advisedly, I know — we have kept you carefully in the background, my dear. But this is n't going to do forever, you know."

"Why not? I — I like it."

Mrs. Thayer smiled, but she frowned again thoughtfully.

"I know, dear; but if you are to learn this — this —" Mrs. Thayer stumbled and paused as she

always stumbled and paused when she tried to reduce to words her present extraordinary mission. "You will have to — to learn to meet people and mingle with them easily and naturally."

The earnest look of the eager student came at once to Helen Denby's face.

"You mean, I'll have to meet and mingle with swell people if I, too, am — Oh, that horrid word again! Mrs. Thayer, *why* can't I learn to stop using it? But you mean — I know what you mean. You mean I'll have to meet and mingle with — with ladies and gentlemen if I'm to be one myself. Is n't that it?"

"Y-yes, of course; only — the very words 'lady' and 'gentleman' have been so abused that we — we — Oh, Helen, Helen, you do put things so baldly, and it sounds so — so — Don't you see, dear? It's all just as I've told you lots of times. The minute you begin to talk about it, you lose it. It's something that comes to you by absorption and intuition."

"But there are things I have to learn, Mrs. Thayer, — real things, like holding your fork, and clothes, and finger nails, and not speaking so loud, and not talking about 'folks' being 'swell' and 'tony,' and —"

"Yes, yes, I know," interrupted Mrs. Thayer, with a touch of desperation. "But, after all, it's all so — so impossible! And —" She stopped abruptly at the look of terrified dismay that always leaped to Helen Denby's eyes in response to such a word. "No, no, I don't mean that. But, really, Helen,"

she went on hurriedly, "the time has come when you must be seen more. And it will be quite safe at the shore, I am sure. You'll meet no one who ever saw you in Dalton; that is certain."

"Then, of course, if you say I'll have to — I'll have to. That's all."

"I do say it."

"My, but I dread it!" Helen drew in her breath and bit her lip.

"All the more reason why you should do it then," smiled Mrs. Thayer briskly. "You're to learn *not* to dread it. See? And it'll be easier than you think. There are some very pleasant people coming down. The Gillespies, Mrs. Reynolds and her little Gladys, — about Betty's age, by the way, — and next month there'll be the Drew girls and Mr. Donald Estey and his brother John. Later there will be others — the Chandlers, and Mr. Eric Shaw. And I'm going to begin immediately to have them see you, and have you see them."

"They'll know me as 'Mrs. Darling'?"

"Of course — a friend of mine."

"But I want to — to help in some way."

"You do help. You help with the children — your companionship."

"But that's the way I've learned — so many things, Mrs. Thayer."

"Of course. And that's the way you'll learn — many other things. But there are others — still others — that you can learn in no way as well as by

association with the sort of well-bred men and women you will meet this summer. I don't mean that you are *always* to be with them, my dear; but I do mean that you must be with them enough so that it is a matter of supreme indifference to you whether you are with them or not. Do you understand? You must learn to be at ease with — anybody. See?"

Helen sighed and nodded her head slowly.

"Yes, I think I do, Mrs. Thayer; and I will try — so hard!" She hesitated, then asked abruptly, "Who is Mr. Donald Estey, please?"

There was an odd something in Mrs. Thayer's laugh as she answered.

"And why, pray, do you single him out?"

"Because of something — different in your voice, when you said his name."

Mrs. Thayer laughed again.

"That's more cleverly put than you know, child," she shrugged. "I never thought of it before, but I fancy we all do say Mr. Donald Estey's name — with a difference."

"Is he so very important, then?"

"In his own estimation — yes! There! I was wrong to say that, Helen, and you must forget it. Mr. Donald Estey is a very wealthy, very capable, very delightful and brilliant young bachelor. He is a little spoiled, perhaps; but that's our fault and not his, I suspect, for he's petted and made of enough to turn any man's head. He's very entertaining. He knows something about everything. He can talk

Egyptian scarabs with my brother, and Irish crochet with me, and then turn around and discuss politics with my husband, and quote poetry to Phillis Drew in the next breath. All this, of course, makes him a very popular man."

"But he's a — a real gentleman, the kind that my husband would like?"

"Why, of — of course!" Mrs. Thayer frowned slightly; then, suddenly, she laughed. "To tell the truth he's very like your husband, in some ways, I've heard my brother say — tastes, temperament, and so forth."

An odd something leaped to Helen Denby's eyes.

"You mean, what *he* likes, Burke likes?" she questioned.

"Why, y-yes; you might put it that way, I suppose. But never mind. You'll see for yourself when you see him."

"Yes, I'll see — when I see him." Helen Denby nodded and relaxed in her seat. The odd something was still smouldering in her eyes.

"Then it's all settled, remember," smiled Mrs. Thayer. "You're not to run and hide now when somebody comes. You're to learn to meet people. That's your next lesson."

"My next lesson — my next lesson," repeated Helen Denby, half under her breath. "Oh, I hope I'll learn so much — in this next lesson! I won't run and hide now, indeed, I won't, Mrs. Thayer!"

And at the glorified earnestness of her face, Mrs.

Thayer, watching, felt suddenly her own throat tighten convulsively.

In spite of her valiant promise, Helen Denby, a week later, did almost run and hide when the Gillespies, the first of Mrs. Thayer's guests, arrived. Held, however, by a stern something within her, she bravely stood her ground and forced herself to meet Mr. and Mrs. Gillespie and their daughters, Miss Alice and Miss Maud. It was not so difficult the next week when Mrs. Reynolds came, perhaps because of the pretty little Gladys, so near her own Betty's age.

Fully alive to her own shortcomings, however, embarrassed, and distrustful of herself, Helen was careful never to push herself forward, never to take the initiative. And because she was so quiet and unobtrusive, her intense watchfulness, and slavish imitation of what she saw, passed unnoticed. Gradually, as the days came and went, the tenseness of her concentration relaxed, and she began to move and speak with less studied caution. It was at this juncture that Mr. Donald Estey arrived. Instantly into her bearing sprang an entirely new, alert eagerness. But this, too, passed unnoticed, for the change was not in herself alone. The entire household had made instant response to the presence of Mr. Donald Estey. The men sharpened their wits, and the women freshened their furbelows. Breakfast was served on the minute with never a vacant chair; and even the steps of the maids in the kitchen quickened.

Because Mr. Donald Estey was always surrounded by an admiring group, the fact that "that quiet little Mrs. Darling" was almost invariably one of the group did not attract attention. It was Mr. Donald Estey himself, in fact, who first noticed it; and the reason that he noticed it was because once, when she was not there, he found himself looking for her eager face. He realized then that for some time he had been in the habit of finding his chief inspiration in a certain pair of wondrously beautiful blue eyes bent full upon himself.

Not that the encountering of admiring feminine eyes bent full upon him was a new experience to Mr. Donald Estey; but that these eyes were different. There was something strangely fascinating and compelling in their earnest gaze. It was on the day that he first missed them that he suddenly decided to cultivate their owner.

He began by asking casual questions of his fellow guests, but he could find out very little concerning the lady. She was a Mrs. Darling, a friend of their hostess (which he knew already). She was a widow, they believed, though they had never heard her husband mentioned. She was pleasant enough — but so shy and retiring! Charming face she had, though, and beautiful eyes. But did he not think she was — er — well, a little peculiar?

Mr. Donald Estey did not answer this, directly. He became, indeed, always very evasive when his fellow guests turned about and began to question

him. Very soon, too, he ceased his own questioning. But that he had not lost his interest in Mrs. Darling was most unmistakably shown at once, for openly and systematically he began to seek her society — to the varying opinions (but unvarying interest) of the rest of the house party.

If Mr. Donald Estey had expected Mrs. Darling to be shy and coy at his advances, he found himself entirely mistaken. She welcomed him with a frank delight that was most flattering, at the same time most puzzling, owing to a certain elusive quality that he could not name.

Mr. Donald Estey thought that he knew women well. It pleased his fancy to think that he had his feminine friends nicely pigeonholed and labeled, and that he had but to pass an hour or two of intimate talk with any woman to be able at once to ticket her accurately. His first hour of intimate talk with Mrs. Darling, however, left him confused and baffled — but mightily interested: in the course of that one hour he had shelved her in almost every one of his pigeonholes, only to find at the end of it that she was still free and uncatalogued.

She was a flirt; she was not a flirt. She was sincere; she was hypocritical. She was brilliantly subtle; she was incredibly stupid. She was charming; she was commonplace. She was as clear as crystal; she was as inscrutable as a sphinx — and she was all these things in that one short first hour. At the end of it, Mr. Donald Estey, with a long breath and a frown,

but with a quickened pulse, decided that he would have another hour with her as soon as possible.

He had no difficulty in obtaining it. Mrs. Darling, indeed, seemed quite as desirous of his society as he was of hers; yet there was still the elusive something in her manner that robbed it of all offensive eagerness. Again to-day, after the hour's intimate talk, Estey found himself confused and baffled, with the lady still outside his pigeonholes. Nor did he find the situation changed the next day, or the next. Then suddenly he awoke to a new element in the case — the extraordinary deference that was being paid his lightest wish or preference on the part of Mrs. Darling.

At first, doubting the accuracy of his suspicions, he systematically put her to the test, choosing purposely the most obvious and unmistakable.

Blue was his favorite color, he said: she appeared in blue the next day. Browning was his best-loved poet, he declared: in less than an hour he found her poring over "Pippa Passes" in the library. A woman who could talk, and talk well, on current events won his sincere admiration every time, he told her: he wondered the next morning how late she must have sat up the night before, studying the merits and demerits of the four presidential candidates.

Mr. Donald Estey was flattered, amused, and curiously interested. Not that what looked to be a determined assault upon his heart was exactly a new experience for him; but that the circumstances in this

case were so out of the ordinary, and that he was still trying to "place" this young woman. He was not sure even, always, that she was trying to make a bid for his affections. He was not sure, either, of his own mind regarding her. In spite of his interest, he was conscious, sometimes, of a distinct feeling of aversion toward her. She was not always, to his mind, quite — the lady, though she was improving in that respect. (Even in his thoughts the word gave him a shock: he could hardly imagine a candidate for the position of Mrs. Donald Estey in need of — improvement!) But she *was* beautiful, and there was something wonderfully alluring in her eager way of listening to his every word. She was, indeed, not a little refreshing after the languid conservatism of some of the sophisticated young women one usually found at these country houses. Besides, was she, after all, really in love with him? Very likely she was not. At all events, it could do no harm — this mild flirtation — if flirtation it were! He would not worry about it. Plenty of time yet to — to withdraw. He had but to receive (apparently) a summoning message, and he could go at once. That would, of course, end the affair. Meanwhile — But just exactly what type of woman was she, anyway?

Still amused, interested, and contentedly secure, therefore, Mr. Donald Estey pursued for another week his pleasant pastime of finding just the proper pigeonhole for this tantalizing will-o'-the-wisp of femininity; then, sharply, he received a jolt that

left him figuratively — almost literally — breathless and gasping.

They were talking of marriage.

"But you yourself have never married," she said.

"No, I have never married."

"I wonder why."

Mr. Donald Estey frowned and stirred restlessly — there were times when Mrs. Darling's unconventionality was not "refreshing."

"Perhaps — the right girl has never found me," he shrugged.

"Oh, Mr. Estey, please, what sort of a girl would be the right one — for you?"

"Well, really — er — " He stopped and stirred again uneasily — there was an almost frenzied earnestness in her face and manner that was somewhat disconcerting.

"That might be hard telling," he evaded banteringly.

"But you *could* tell me, Mr. Estey. I know you could. And, oh, won't you, please?"

"Why, er — Mrs. Darling!" He gave an embarrassed laugh as he sought for just the right word to say. "You seem — er — extraordinarily interested." He laughed again — to hide the fact that he knew that he had said just the *wrong* thing.

"I am interested. Indeed, Mr. Estey, it would mean — you cannot know what it would mean — if you'd tell me."

"Why — er — really —"

"Yes, yes, I know. I had n't ought to talk like this. Ladies don't. I can see it in your face. But it's because I want to *know* so — because I must know. Please, won't you tell me?"

With a quick lifting of his head Mr. Donald Estey pulled himself sharply together. Flattering as it was to be thus deferred to, this flirtation — if flirtation it were — had gone quite far enough. He laughed again lightly and sprang to his feet.

"Could n't think of it, Mrs. Darling. Really, I could n't, you know!"

"Mr. Estey!" She, too, was on her feet. She had laid a persuasive hand on his arm. "Please, you think I'm joking; but I'm not. I really mean it. If you only would do it — it would mean so much to me! And don't — don't look at me like that. I *know* I'm not being proper, and I know ladies don't do so — what I'm doing. But when I saw it — such a splendid chance to ask you, I — I just had to do it."

"But — but —" The startled, nonplussed man stuttered like a bashful schoolboy; "it really is so — so absurd, Mrs. Darling, when you — er — stop to think of it."

She sighed despairingly, but she did not take her hand from his arm.

"Then, if" — she spoke hurriedly, and with evident embarrassment — "if you won't tell me that way, won't you please tell me another? Could you — would you — Am I *any* like that girl, Mr. Estey?"

Mr. Donald Estey was guilty of an actual gasp of

dismay. In a whirl of vexation at the situation in which he found himself, he groped blindly for a safe way out. Of course young women (young women such as he knew) did not really propose to one; but was it possible that that was exactly what this somewhat remarkable young widow was doing? It seemed incredible. And yet —

"Am I, Mr. Estey? Or do you think I could — learn?"

"Why, er — er —"

"I mean, would you — could you marry — *me?*"

Every vestige of self-control slipped from the tortured man like a garment. Conscious only of an insane desire to flee from this wretched woman who was about to march him to the altar willy-nilly, he quite jerked his arm free.

"Well, really, Mrs. Darling, I — I —"

"You would n't, I can see you would n't!" There was a heartbroken little sob in her voice.

"But — but, Mrs. Darling! Oh, hang it all! What a perfectly preposterous situation!" he stormed wrathfully. "I don't want — to marry anybody. I tell you I'm not a marrying man! I —" He stopped short at the astounding change that had come to the little woman opposite.

She was staring into his face with a growing terror that suddenly, at its height, broke into a gale of hysterical laughter. She covered her face with her hands and dropped into the chair behind her.

"Oh, oh, you did n't — you did n't — but you

did!" she choked, swaying her body back and forth. The next moment she was on her feet, facing him, a new something in her eyes. The laughter was quite gone. "You need n't worry, Mr. Donald Estey." She spoke hurriedly, and with all the wild *abandon* of her old self. "I was n't asking you to marry me — so you don't have to refuse." Her voice quivered with hurt pride.

"Why, of course not, of course not, my dear lady!" He caught at the straw. "I never thought —"

"Yes, you did; and you was floundering around trying to find a way to say no. I was n't good enough for you. And that's just what I was trying to find out, too, — but it hurt, just the same, when I did find out!"

"Oh, but, Mrs. Darling, I did n't mean —"

"Yes, you did. I saw it in your eyes, and in the way you drew back. Only I — I did n't mean *you*. I never thought of your taking it that way — that I wanted to marry *you*. It was some one else that I meant."

"Some one *else?*" The stupefaction in the man's face deepened.

"Yes. You don't know him. But they said you was — *were*, I mean, like him; that what *you* liked, he would like. See? And that's why I tried to find out what — what you did like, so I could learn to be what would please him."

The petted idol of unnumbered drawing-rooms blinked his eyes.

"You mean you were using *me* as an — er — understudy?" he demanded.

"Yes — no — I don't know. I was just trying to walk and talk and breathe and move the way you wanted me to, so I could do it by and by for — him."

Mr. Donald Estey drew in his breath.

"Well, by — Jove!"

"And I'm going to." She lifted her chin determinedly. "*I'm going to!* And now you know — why I asked you what I did. I was hoping I — I had gained a little in all these weeks. I've been trying so hard. And before you came, when Mrs. Thayer told me you were like — like the man I love, I determined then to watch you and study you, and do everything the way you liked, if I could find out what it was. And now to have you think I was *asking* you to — to — As if I'd ever marry — *you!*" she choked. The next moment, with a wild fling of her arms, she was gone.

Alone, Mr. Donald Estey drew a long breath. As he turned, he faced his own image in the mirror across the room. Slowly he advanced toward it. There was a quizzical smile in his eyes.

"Donald, me boy," he apostrophized, "you have been rejected. Do you hear? *Rejected!* Jove! But what an extraordinary young woman!" His eyes left the mirror and sought the door by which she had gone.

Mr. Donald Estey did not see Mrs. Darling again during his stay. A sudden indisposition prevented her from being among the guests for some days.

CHAPTER XV

A WOMAN'S WILL

DR. GLEASON'S Arctic trip, designed to cover a year of research and discovery, prolonged itself into three years and two months. Shipwrecks, thrilling escapes, months of silence, and a period when hope for the safety of the party was quite gone, all figured in the story before the heroic rescue brought a happier ending to what had come so near to being another tragedy of the ice-bound North.

It was June when Frank Gleason, in the care of a nurse and a physician, arrived at his sister's summer cottage by the sea.

For a month after his coming Frank Gleason was too ill to ask many questions. But with returning strength came an insistence upon an answer to a query he had already several times put to his sister.

"Edith, what of the Denbys? Where is Helen? Why do you always evade any questions about her?"

"She is here with me."

"Here — *still?*"

"Yes. And she's a great comfort and help to me."

"And Burke does n't know yet where she is?"

"Not that we know of."

"Impossible — all this time!"

"Oh, I don't know. All our friends know her as 'Mrs. Darling.' The Denbys never come here, and

they'd never think of looking here for her, anyway. We figured that out long ago."

"But it can't go on forever! When is she going back?"

An odd look crossed Mrs. Thayer's face.

"I don't know, Frank; but not for some time — if ever — I should judge, from present indications."

"'If ever'! Good Heavens, Edith, what do you mean?" demanded the doctor, pulling himself up in his chair. "I *knew* no good would come of this tom-foolishness!"

"There, there, dear, never mind all this now," begged his sister. "Please don't try to talk about it any more."

"But I will talk about it, Edith. I want to know — and you might just as well tell me in the first place, and not hang back and hesitate," protested the doctor, with all the irritability of a naturally strong man who finds himself so unaccountably weak in his convalescence. "What's the trouble? Has n't that — er — fool-improvement business worked out? Well, I did n't think it would!"

Edith Thayer laughed softly.

"On the contrary, it's working beautifully. Wait till you see her. She's a dear — a very charming woman. She's developed wonderfully. But along with it all has come to her a very deep and genuine, and rather curious, humility, together with a pride, the chief aim of which is to avoid anything like the

position in which she found herself as the mortifying, distress-causing wife of Burke Denby."

"Humph!" commented the doctor.

"That Burke does n't love her, she is thoroughly convinced. To go to him now, tacitly asking to be taken back, she feels to be impossible. She has no notion of going where she is n't wanted; and she feels very sure she *is n't* wanted by either Burke or his father. Of course the longer it runs, and the longer she stays away, the harder it seems for her to make herself known."

"Oh, but this *can't* go on forever," protested Frank Gleason again, restlessly. "I'll see Burke. As soon as I'm on my feet again I shall run up there."

"But you've given your promise not to tell, remember."

"Yes, yes, I know. I shan't tell, of course. But I can bring back something, I'm sure, that will — will cause this stubborn young woman to change her mind."

"I doubt it. Helen says she's not ready to go back yet, anyway."

"Not sufficiently 'improved,' I suppose," laughed the doctor, a little grimly.

"Perhaps. Then, too, she has other plans all made."

"Oh, she has!"

"Yes. She's going abroad. Do you remember Angie Reynolds? — Angie Ried, you know — married Ned Reynolds."

"Yes. Nice girl!"

"Well, they're going abroad for some years — some business for the firm, I believe. Anyway, Ned will have to be months at a time in different cities, and Angie and little Gladys are going with him. They have asked Helen and Betty to go, too; and Helen has agreed to go."

"And leave you?"

At the indignant expression on her brother's face, Edith Thayer laughed merrily.

"But, my dear Frank, I thought you were just threatening to *get* Helen to leave me!" she challenged.

"So I was," retorted the doctor, nothing daunted. "But it was to get her to go home, where she belonged; not on any wild-goose chase like this abroad business. What does she want? — to be presented at court? Maybe she thinks that's going to do the job!"

"Oh, come, come, Frank, now you're sarcastic!" Mrs. Thayer's voice was earnest, though her eyes were twinkling. "It is n't a wild-goose chase a bit. It's a very sensible plan. In the first place, it takes Helen out of the country — which is wise, if she's still going to try to keep her whereabouts a secret from Burke; for eventually some one, somewhere, would see her — some one who knew her face. She can't always live so secluded a life as she has these past three years, of course, — we have spent the greater share of that time at the beach here, coming early and staying late.

"But that is n't all. Angie has taken a great fancy to both Helen and Dorothy Elizabeth, and she likes

to have Gladys with them. The children are the same age — about five, you know — and great cronies. Angie is taking Helen as a sort of companion-governess. Her duties will be light and congenial. Both the children will be in her charge, and their treatment and advantages will be identical. There will be a nursery governess under her, and she herself will be much with Angie, which will be invaluable to her, in many ways. And, by the way, Frank, the fact that a woman like Angie Reynolds is taking her for a traveling companion shows, more conclusively than anything else could, how greatly improved Helen is — what a really charming woman she has come to be. But it is a splendid chance for her, certainly, and especially for Betty — her whole life centers now in Betty — and I urged her taking it. At first she demurred, on account of leaving me; but I succeeded in convincing her that it was altogether too good an opportunity to lose."

"Opportunity, indeed! When does she go?"

"The last of next month."

"Oh, that's all right, then. I shall see Burke long before that." The doctor settled back in his chair with a relieved sigh.

His sister eyed him with a disturbed frown.

"Frank, dear, you can't do anything," she ventured at last. "Did n't I tell you she was n't ready to go back?"

"But she'll have to go — some time."

"Perhaps. But wait. I'm not going to say an-

other word now, nor let you. Wait till you see her — and you shall see her in a day or two — just as soon as you are strong enough. But not another word now." And to make sure that he obeyed, Mrs. Thayer rose laughingly and left the room.

It was four days later that Frank Gleason for the first time ventured downstairs and out into the warm sunshine on the south veranda. Hearing a child's gleeful laugh and a woman's gently remonstrative voice, — a voice that he thought he recognized, — he walked the length of the veranda and rounded the corner.

His slippered feet made no sound, so quite unheralded he came upon the woman and the little girl on the wide veranda steps. Neither one saw him, and he stopped short at the corner, his eyes alight with sudden admiration.

Frank Gleason thought he had never seen a more lovely little girl. Blue-eyed, golden-haired, and rosy-cheeked, she was the typical child-beautiful of picture and romance. A-tiptoe on the topmost step she was reaching one dimpled hand for a gorgeous red geranium blooming in a pot decorating the balustrade. In the other hand, tightly clutched, was another gorgeous blossom, sadly crushed and broken. She was laughing gleefully. Near her, but not attempting to touch her, was a woman the doctor recognized at once. It was Helen — but Helen with a subtle difference of face, eyes, hair, dress, and manner that was at once illuminating but baffling.

"Betty, dear," she was saying gently, "no, no! Mother said not to pick the flowers."

The child turned roguish, willful eyes.

"But I wants to pick 'em."

"Mother can't let you, dear. And see, they are so much prettier growing!"

The small red lips pouted. The little curly head gave a vigorous shake.

"But I wants 'em to grow in my hands — so," insisted a threateningly tearful voice, as the tightly clutched flower was thrust forward for inspection.

"But they won't grow there, darling. See! — this one is all crumpled and broken now. It can't even lift its poor little head. Come, we don't want the rest to be like that, do we? Come! Come away with me."

The young eyes grew mutinous.

"I wants 'em to grow in my hand," insisted the red lips again.

"But mother does n't." There was a resolute note of decision in the quiet voice now; but suddenly it grew wonderfully soft and vibrant. "And daddy would n't, either, dearie. Only think how sorry daddy would be to see that poor little flower in Betty's hand!"

As if in response to a potent something in her mother's voice, Betty's eyes grew roundly serious.

"Why — would daddy — be sorry?"

"Because daddy loves all beautiful things, and he wants them to stay beautiful. And this poor little flower in Betty's hand won't be beautiful much

longer, I fear. It is all broken and crushed; and daddy —"

With a sudden sense of guilt, as if trespassing on holy ground, the doctor strode forward noisily.

"So this is Dorothy Elizabeth and her mother — " he began gayly; but he could get no further.

Helen Denby turned with a joyous cry and an eagerly extended hand.

"Oh, Dr. Gleason, I'm so glad! You *are* better, are n't you? I'm so glad to see you!"

"Yes, I'm better. I'm well — only I can't seem to make people believe it. And you — I don't need to ask how you are. And so this big girl is the little Dorothy Elizabeth I used to know. You have your mother's eyes, my dear. Come, won't you shake hands with me?"

The little girl advanced slowly, her gaze searching the doctor's face. Then, in her sweet, high-pitched treble, came the somewhat disconcerting question: —

"Is you — daddy?"

The doctor laughed lightly.

"No, my dear. I'm a poor unfortunate man who has n't any little girl like you; but we'll hope, one of these days, you'll see — daddy." He turned to Helen Denby with suddenly grave, questioning eyes.

"Betty, dear," — Mrs. Denby refused to meet the doctor's gaze, — "go carry the flower to Annie and ask her please to put it in water for you; then run out and play with Bessie in the garden. Mother wants to talk to Dr. Gleason a few minutes." Then,

to the doctor, she turned an agitated face. "Surely, did n't your sister — tell you? I'm going to London with Mrs. Reynolds."

"Yes, she told me. But perhaps I was hoping to persuade you — to do otherwise."

Her eyes grew troubled.

"But it's such a fine chance —"

"For more of this 'improvement' business, I suppose," cut in the doctor, a bit brusquely.

She turned reproachful eyes upon him.

"Oh, please, doctor, don't make fun of me like —"

"As if I'd make fun of you, child!" cut in the doctor, still more sharply.

"Oh, but I can't blame you, of course," she smiled wistfully; "and especially now that I see myself how absurd I was to think, for a minute, that I could make myself over into a — a — the sort of wife that Burke Denby would wish to have."

"Absurd that you could — Come, come! *Now* what nonsense are you talking?" snapped the doctor.

"But it is n't nonsense," objected Helen Denby earnestly. "Don't you suppose I know *now?* I used to think it was something you could learn as you would a poem, or that you could put on to you, as you would a new dress. But I know now it's something inside of you that has to grow and grow just as you grow; and I'm afraid all the putting on and learning in the world won't get *me* there."

"Oh, come, come, Mrs. Denby!" expostulated the doctor, in obvious consternation.

"But it's so. Listen," she urged tremulously. "Now I — I just can't like the kind of music Burke does, — discords, and no tune, you know, — though I've tried and tried to. Day after day I've gone into the music-room and put in those records, — the classics and the operatic ones that are the real thing, you know, — but I can't like them; and I still keep liking tunes and ragtime. And there are the books, too. I can't help liking jingles and stories that *tell* something; and I don't like poetry — not real poetry like Browning and all the rest of them."

"Browning, indeed! As if that counted, child!"

"Oh, but it's other things — lots of them; vague, elusive things that I can't put my finger on. But I know them now, since I've been here with your sister and her friends. Why, sometimes it is n't anything more than the way a woman speaks, or the way she sits down and gets up, or even the way a bit of lace falls over her hand. But they all help. And they've helped me, too, — oh, so much. I'm so glad now of this chance to thank you. You don't know — you can't know, what it's been for me — to be here."

"But I thought you just said that you — you *could n't* — that is, that you'd — er — given up," floundered the doctor miserably, as if groping for some sort of support on a topsy-turvy world.

"Given up? Perhaps I have — in a way — for myself. You see, I know now that you have to begin young. That's why I'm so happy about Betty. I don't mind about myself any more, if only I can

make it all right for her. Dr. Gleason, I could n't — I just *could n't* have her father ashamed of — Betty!"

"Ashamed of that child! Well, I should say not," blustered the doctor incoherently; "nor of you, either, you brave little woman. Why —"

"Betty *is* a dear, is n't she?" interrupted the mother eagerly. "You *do* think she'll — she'll be everything he could wish? I'm keeping him always before her — what he likes, how he'd want her to do, you know. And almost always I can make her mind now, with daddy's name, and —"

The doctor interrupted with a gesture of impatience.

"My dear lady, can't you see that now — right *now* is just the time for you to go back to your husband?"

The eager, pleading, wistful-eyed little mother opposite became suddenly the dignified, stern-eyed woman.

"Has he said he wanted me, Dr. Gleason?"

"Why — er — y-yes; well, that is, he — I know he has wanted to know where you were."

"Very likely; but that is n't wanting *me*. Dr. Gleason, don't you think I have any pride, any self-respect, even? My husband was ashamed of me. He asked me to go away for a time. He wrote me with his own hand that he wanted a vacation from me. Do you think *now*, without a sign or a word from him, that I am going creeping back to him and ask him to take me back?"

"But he does n't know where you are, to *give* you a sign," argued the doctor.

"You've seen him, have n't you?"

"Why, y-yes — but not lately. But — I'm going to."

A startled look came into her eyes. The next minute she smiled sadly.

"Are you? Very well; we'll see — if he says anything. You won't tell him where I am, I know. I have your promise. But, Dr. Gleason," — her voice grew very sweet and serious, — "I shall not be satisfied now with anything short of a happy married life. I know now what marriage is, where there is love, and trust in each other, and where they like to do and talk about the same things. I've seen your sister and her husband. Unless I can *know* that I'm going to bring that kind of happiness to Burke, I shall not consent to go back to him. I will give him his daughter. Some time, when she is old enough, I want him to see her. When I know that he is proud of my Betty, I may not — mind the rest so much, perhaps. But now — now —" With a choking little cry she turned and fled down the steps and out on to the garden path.

Baffled, irritated, yet frowningly admiring, the doctor stalked into the house.

In the hall he came face to face with his sister. She fluttered into instant anxiety.

"Why, Frank — *outdoors?* Who said you could do that?"

"I did. Oh, the doctor said so, too," he flung out hurriedly, answering the dawning disapproval in her eyes. "I'm going to Dalton next week."

"Oh, but, Frank —"

"Now, please don't argue. I'm going. If you and the doctor can get me well enough to go — all right. But I'm going whether I'm well enough or not."

"But, Frank, dear, you can't *do* anything. You know you promised."

"Oh, I shan't break any promises, of course. But I'm going to see Burke. I'm going to find out if he really is ninny enough to keep on holding off, at the end of a silly quarrel, the sweetest little wife a man ever had, and —"

"I opine you've seen Helen," smiled Edith Thayer, with a sudden twinkle.

"I have, and — does n't like Browning, indeed! And can't help liking tunes! Oh, good Heavens, Edith, if Burke Denby does n't — Well, we'll see next week," he glowered, striding away, followed by the anxious but still twinkling eyes of his sister.

In accordance with his threat, and in spite of protests, the doctor went to Dalton the next week. But almost by return train he was back again, stern-lipped and somber-eyed.

"Why, Frank, so soon as this?" cried his sister. "Surely Burke Denby did n't —"

"I did n't see him."

"His father, then?"

"Neither one. They're gone. South America. Bridge contract. Went themselves this time."

"Oh, that explains it — why we have n't heard from them since you came back. I *had* thought it strange, Frank, that not a word of congratulation or even inquiry had come from them."

"Yes, I know. I — I'd thought it strange myself — a little. But that does n't help this thing any. I can't very well go to South America to see Burke, just now — though I'd like to."

"Of course not. Besides, don't forget that you very likely would n't accomplish anything if you did see him."

So deep was the sudden gloom on the doctor's face at her words that the lady added quickly: "You did find out something in Dalton, Frank! I know you did by your face. You saw some one."

"Oh, I saw — Brett."

"Who's he?"

"Denby's general manager and chief factotum."

"Well, he ought to know — something."

"He does — everything. But he won't tell — anything."

"Oh!"

"And it's right that he should n't, of course. It's his business to keep his mouth shut — and he knows his business as well as any man I can think of. Oh, he was perfectly civil, and apparently very gracious and open-hearted in what he said."

"What *did* he say?"

"He said that they had gone to South America on a big bridge contract, and that they would n't be home for four or five months yet. He said that they were very well, and that, probably, when they came back from this trip, they would go to South Africa for another six months. I could n't get anywhere near asking about Helen, and Burke's present state of mind concerning her. He could scent a question of that sort forty words away; and he invariably veered off at a tangent long before I got to it. It was like starting for New York and landing in Montreal! I had to give it up. So far as anything I could learn to the contrary, Mr. Burke Denby and his father are well, happy, and perfectly content to build bridges for heathens and Hottentots the rest of their natural existence. And there you are! How, pray, in the face of that, are we going to keep Helen from running off to London?"

"I should n't try."

"But — oh, hang it all, Edith! This can't go on."

"Oh, yes, it can, my dear; and I'm inclined to think it's going on just right. Very plainly they are n't ready for each other — yet. Let her go to London and make the best of all these advantages for herself and Betty; and let him go on with his bridge-building for the Hottentots. 'T will do them good — both of them, and will be all the better for them when they do come together."

"Oh, then they *are* to come together some time!"

"Why, Frank, of course they are! You could n't

keep them apart," declared the lady, with smiling confidence.

"But, Edith, you have n't ever talked like this — before," puzzled the doctor, frowning.

"I've never known before that Burke Denby was building bridges for the Hottentots."

"Nonsense! That's their business. They've always built bridges."

"Yes, but Master Burke and his father have n't always gone to superintend their construction," she flashed. "In other words, if Burke Denby is trying so strenuously to get away from himself, it's a pretty sure sign that there's something in himself that he wants to get away from! You see?"

"Well, I should like to see," sighed the doctor, with very evident doubt.

CHAPTER XVI

EMERGENCIES

In September Helen Denby and Dorothy Elizabeth went to London. With their going, a measure of peace came to Frank Gleason. Not having their constant presence to remind him of his friend's domestic complications, he could the more easily adopt his sister's complacent attitude of cheery confidence that it would all come out right in time — that it *must* come out right. Furthermore, with Helen not under his own roof, he was not so guiltily conscious of "aiding and abetting" a friend's runaway wife.

Soon after Helen's departure for London, a letter from Burke Denby in far-away South America told of the Denbys' rejoicing at the happy outcome of the Arctic trip, and expressed the hope that the doctor was well, and that they might meet him as soon as possible after their return from South America in December.

The letter was friendly and cordial, but not long. It told little of their work, and nothing of themselves. And, in spite of its verbal cordiality, the doctor felt, at its conclusion, that he had, as it were, been attending a formal reception when he had hoped for a cozy chat by the fire.

In December, at Burke's bidding, he ran up to Dalton for a brief visit, but it proved to be as stiff and

unsatisfying as the letter had been. Burke never mentioned his wife; but he wore so unmistakable an "Of-course-I-understand-you-are-angry-with-me" air, that the doctor (much to his subsequent vexation when he realized it) went out of his way to be heartily cordial, as if in refutation of the disapproval idea — which was not the impression the doctor really wished to convey at all. He was, in fact, very angry with Burke. He wanted nothing so much as to give him a piece of his mind. Yet, so potent was Burke's dignified aloofness that he found himself chattering of Inca antiquities and Babylonian tablets instead of delivering his planned dissertation on the futility of quarrels in general and of Burke's and Helen's in particular.

With John Denby he had little better success, so far as results were concerned; though he did succeed in asking a few questions.

"You have never heard from — Mrs. Denby?" he began abruptly, the minute he found himself alone with Burke's father.

"Never."

"But you — you would like to!"

The old man's face became suddenly mask-like — a phenomenon with which John Denby's business associates were very familiar, but which Dr. Frank Gleason had never happened to witness before.

"If you will pardon me, doctor," began John Denby in a colorless voice, "I would rather not discuss the lady. There is n't anything new that I can

say, and I am beginning to feel — as does my son — that I would rather not hear her name mentioned."

This ended it, of course. There was nothing the doctor could say or do. Bound by his promise to Helen Denby, he could not tell the facts; and silenced by his host's words and manner, he could not discuss potentialities. There was nothing for it, therefore, but to drop the subject. And he dropped it. He went home the next day. Resolutely then he busied himself with his own affairs. Determinedly he set himself to forget the affairs of the Denbys. This was the more easily accomplished because of the long silences and absences of the Denby men themselves, and because Helen Denby still remained abroad with Angie Reynolds.

In London Helen Denby was living in a new world. Quick to realize the advantages that were now hers, she determined to make the most of them — especially for Betty. Always everything now centered around Betty.

In Mrs. Reynolds Helen had found a warm friend and sympathetic ally, one who, she knew, would keep quite to herself the story Helen had told her. Even Mr. Reynolds was not let into the inner secret of Helen's presence with them. To him she was a companion governess, a friend of the Thayers', to whom his wife had taken a great fancy — a most charming little woman, indeed, whom he himself liked very much.

Freed from the fear of meeting Burke Denby or any of his friends, Helen, for the first time since her flight from Dalton, felt that she was really safe, and that she could, with an undivided mind, devote her entire attention to her self-imposed task.

From London to Berlin, and from Berlin to Genoa, she went happily, as Mr. Reynolds's business called him. To Helen it made little difference where she was, so long as she could force every picture, statue, mountain, concert, book, or individual to pay toll to her insatiable hunger "to know" — that she might tell Betty.

Mrs. Reynolds, almost as eager and interested as Helen herself, conducted their daily lives with an eye always alert as to what would be best for Helen and Betty. Teachers for Gladys and Betty — were teachers for Helen, too; and carefully Mrs. Reynolds made it a point that her own social friends should also be Helen's — which Helen accepted with unruffled cheerfulness. Helen, indeed, had now almost reached the goal long ago set for her by Mrs. Thayer: it was very nearly a matter of supreme indifference to her whether she met people or not, so far as the idea of meeting them was concerned. There came a day, however, when, for a moment, Helen almost yielded to her old run-and-hide temptation.

They were back in London, and it was near the close of Helen's third year abroad.

"I met Mr. Donald Estey this morning," said Mrs. Reynolds at the luncheon table that noon. "I asked

him to dine with us to-morrow night. He is here for the winter."

"So? Good! I shall be glad to see Estey," commented her husband.

Once Helen would have given a cry, dropped her fork with a clatter, or otherwise made her startled perturbation conspicuous to all. That only an almost imperceptible movement and a slight change of color resulted now showed something of what Helen Denby had learned during the last few years.

"You say Mr. Donald Estey will be — here, to-morrow?" she asked quietly.

"Yes. You remember him," nodded Mrs. Reynolds. "He was at the Thayers' at the same time I was there six years ago — tall, good-looking fellow with glasses."

"Yes, I remember," smiled Helen. And never would one have imagined that behind the quiet words was a wild clamor of "Oh, what shall I do — what shall I do — what *shall* I do?"

What Helen Denby wanted to do was to run away — far away, where Mr. Donald Estey could never find her. Next best would be to tell Mrs. Reynolds that she could not see him; but to do that, she would have to tell why — and she did not want to tell even Mrs. Reynolds the story of that awful hour at the Thayers' North Shore cottage. True, she might feign illness and plead a headache; but Mrs. Reynolds had said that Mr. Estey was to be in London all winter — and she could not very well have a head-

ache all winter! There was plainly no way but to meet this thing fairly and squarely. Besides, had not Mrs. Thayer said long ago that emergencies were the greatest test of manners, as well as of ropes and housewives, and that she must always be ready for emergencies? Was she to fail now at this, her first real test?

Mr. Donald Estey was already in the drawing-room when Helen Denby came down to dinner the following evening. She had put on a simple white dress — after a horrified rejection of a blue one, her first choice. (She had remembered just in time that Mr. Donald Estey's favorite color was blue.) She was pale, but she looked charmingly pretty as she entered the room.

"You remember Mr. Estey," Mrs. Reynolds murmured. The next moment Helen found her hand in a warm clasp, and a pair of laughing gray eyes looking straight into hers.

"Oh, yes, I remember him very well," she contrived to say cheerfully.

"And I remember Mrs. Darling very well," came to her ears in Mr. Donald Estey's smoothly noncommittal voice. Then she forced herself to walk calmly across the room and to sit down leisurely.

What anybody said next she did not hear. Somewhere within her a voice was exulting: "I've done it, I've done it, and I did n't make a break!"

It was a small table, and conversation at dinner was general. At first Helen said little, not trusting

herself to speak unless a question made speech imperative; but gradually she found the tense something within her relaxing. She was able then to talk more freely; and before the dinner was over she was apparently quite her usual self.

As to Mr. Donald Estey — Mr. Donald Estey was piqued and surprised, but mightily interested. Half his anticipated pleasure in this dinner had been the fact that he was to see Mrs. Darling again. She would blush and stammer, and be adorably embarrassed, of course. He had not forgotten how distractingly pretty she was when she blushed. He would like to see her blush again.

But here she was — and she had not blushed at all. What had happened? A cool little woman in a cool little gown had put a cool little hand in his, with a cool "Oh, yes, I remember him very well." And that was all. Yet she was the same Mrs. Darling that he had met six years before, and that had — But was she the same, really the same? *That* Mrs. Darling could never have carried off a meeting like this with such sweet serenity. He wondered —

Mr. Donald Estey was still trying to pigeonhole the women he met.

Mr. Donald Estey found frequent opportunity for studying his new-old friend during the days that followed, for they were much together. In Mrs. Reynolds's eyes he made a very convenient fourth for a day's sight-seeing trip or a concert, and she often asked him to join them. Also he made an even

more convenient escort for herself and Helen when, as often happened, Mr. Reynolds was unable to accompany them.

In one way and another, therefore, he was thrown often with this somewhat baffling young woman, who refused to be catalogued. The very fact that he still could not place her made him more persistent than ever. Besides, to himself he owned that he found her very charming — and very charming all the time. There was never on his part now that old feeling of aversion, of which he used to be conscious at times. And she was always quite the lady. He wondered how he could ever have thought her anything else. True, on that remarkable occasion six years before, she had said something about learning how to please — But he was trying to forget that scene. He did not believe that everything was quite straight about that extraordinary occasion. There must have been, in some way, a mistake. He did not believe, anyway, that it signified. At all events, he was not going to worry about a dead and gone past like that.

Mr. Donald Estey was not the only one that was trying to forget that occasion. Helen herself was putting it behind her whenever the thought of it entered her head. Thinking of it brought embarrassment; and she did not like to feel embarrassed. She believed that he was trying to show that he had forgotten it; and if he were disposed to forget the ridiculous affair, surely she should be more than glad to do it. And she considered it very fine of him — very

fine, indeed. She liked him, too. She liked him very much, and she enjoyed being with him. And there could be no harm now, either, in being with him all she liked, for he could never make the mistake of thinking she cared for him particularly. He understood that she loved some one else. They might be as friendly as they pleased. There could never — thank Heaven! — be any misunderstanding about their relationship.

Confidently serene, therefore, Helen Denby enjoyed to the full the stimulus of Mr. Donald Estey's companionship. Then, abruptly, her house of cards tumbled about her ears.

"Mrs. Darling, will you marry me?" the man asked one day. He spoke lightly, so lightly that she could not believe him serious. Yet she gave him a startled glance before she answered.

"Mr. Estey, please don't jest!"

"I'm not jesting. I'm in earnest. Will you marry me?"

"*Mr. Estey!*" She could only gasp her dismay.

"You seem surprised." He was still smiling.

"But you can't — you can't be in earnest, Mr. Estey."

"Why not, pray?"

"Why, you know — you must remember — what I — I told you, six years ago." The red suffused her face.

"You mean — that you cared for some one else?" He spoke gravely now. The smile was quite gone from

his eyes. "But, Mrs. Darling, it's just there that I can't believe *you're* in earnest. Besides, that was six years ago."

"But I am in earnest, and it's the same — *now*," she urged feverishly. "Oh, Mr. Estey, please, please, don't let's spoil our friendship — this way. I thought you understood — I supposed, of course, you understood that I — I loved some one else very much."

"But, Mrs. Darling, you said that six years ago, and — and you're still free *now*. Naturally no man would be such a fool as to let — So I thought, of course, that you had — had —" He came to a helpless pause.

The color swept her face again.

"But I told you then that I was — was learning — was trying to learn — Oh, why do you make me say it?"

He glanced at her face, then jerked himself to his feet angrily.

"Oh, come, come, Mrs. Darling, you don't expect me to believe that you now, *now* are still trying to learn to please (as you call it) some mythically impossible man!"

"He's not mythically impossible. He's real."

"Then he's blind, deaf, and dumb, I suppose!" Mr. Donald Estey's voice was still wrathful.

In spite of herself Helen Denby laughed.

"No, no, oh, no! He's —" Suddenly her face grew grave, and very earnest. "Mr. Estey, I can't tell you. You would n't understand. If you — you

care anything for me, you will not question me any more. I *can't* tell you. Please, please don't say any more."

But Mr. Donald Estey did say more — a little more. He did not say much, for the piteous pleading in the blue eyes stayed half the words on his lips before they were uttered. In the end he went away with a baffled, hurt pain in his own eyes, and Helen did not see him again for some days. But he came back in time. The pain still lurked in his eyes, but there was a resolute smile on his lips.

"If you'll permit, I want things to be as they were before," he told her. "I'm still your friend, and I hope you are mine."

"Why, of course, of course," she stammered. "Only, I — you —"

As she hesitated, plainly disturbed, he raised a quick hand of protest.

"Don't worry." His resolute smile became almost gay. "You'll see how good a friend I can be!"

If Mr. Donald Estey was hoping to take by strategy the citadel that had refused to surrender, he gave no sign. As the days came and went, he was clearly and consistently the good friend he had said he would be; and Helen Denby found no cause to complain, or to fear untoward results.

And so the winter passed and spring came; and it was on a beautiful day in early spring that Helen took Betty (now nine years old) to one of London's most famous curio-shops. There was to be an auc-

tion shortly of a very valuable collection of books and curios, and the advertising catalogue sent to Mr. Reynolds had fallen into Helen's hands.

It was no new thing for Helen to haunt curio-shops and museum-cabinets given over to Babylonian tablets and Egyptian scarabs. Helen had never forgotten the little brown and yellow "soap-cakes" which were so treasured by Burke and his father, and of which she had been so jealous in the old days at Dalton. At every opportunity now she studied them. She wanted to know something about them; but especially she wanted Betty to know about them. Betty must know something about everything — that was of interest to Burke Denby.

To-day, standing with Betty before a glass case of carefully numbered treasures, she was so assiduously studying the catalogue in her hand that she did not notice the approach of the tall man wearing glasses, until an amused voice reached her ears.

"Going in for archæology, Mrs. Darling?"

So violent was her start that it looked almost like one of guilt.

"Oh, Mr. Estey! I — I did n't see you."

His eyes twinkled.

"I should say not — or hear me, either. I spoke twice before you deigned to turn. I did not know you were so interested in archæology, Mrs. Darling."

She laughed lightly.

"I'm not. I think it's —" Her face changed suddenly. "Oh, yes, I'm interested — very much in-

terested," she corrected hastily. "But I mean I — I don't know anything about it. But I — I'm trying to learn. Perhaps you — *Can* you tell me anything about these things?"

Something in her face, the fateful "learn," and her embarrassed manner, sent his thoughts back to the scene between them years before. Stifling an almost uncontrollable impulse to query, "Is it to please *him*, then, that you must learn archæology?" he shrugged his shoulders and shook his head.

"I'm afraid not," he smiled. "Oh, I know a *little* something of them, it's true; but I've just been chatting with a man out in the front shop who could talk to you by the hour about those things — and grow fat on it. He's looking at a toby jug now. Shall I bring him in?"

"No, no, Mr. Estey, of course not!"

"But, really, you'd find him interesting, I'm sure. I met him in Egypt last year. His name is Denby — a New Englander like — Why, Mrs. Darling, what is the matter? Are you faint? You're white as chalk!"

She shook her head.

"No, no, I'm all right. Did you mean" — with white lips she asked the question — "Mr. John Denby?" She threw a quick look at Betty, who was now halfway across the room standing in awed wonder before a huge Buddha.

"No, this is Burke Denby, John Denby's son. I met them both last year. But you seem to — Do you know them?"

"Yes." She said the word quietly, yet with an odd restraint that puzzled him. He saw that the color was coming back to her face — what he could not see or know was that underneath that calm exterior the little woman at his side was wildly adjuring herself: "Now, mind, mind, this is an emergency. Mind you meet it right!" He saw that she took one quick step toward Betty, only to stop and look about her a little uncertainly.

"Mr. Estey," — she was facing him now. Her chin was lifted determinedly, but he noticed that her lips were trembling. "I do not want to see Mr. Burke Denby, and he *must not* see me. There is no way out of this place, apparently, except through the front shop, where he is. I want you to go out there and — and talk to him. Then Betty and I can slip by unnoticed."

"But — but —" stammered the dumfounded man.

"Mr. Estey, you *will* do what I ask you to — and please go — *quickly!* He's sure to come out to see — these." She just touched the case of Babylonian tablets.

To the man, looking into her anguished eyes, came a swift, overwhelming revelation. He remembered, suddenly, stories he had heard of a tragedy in Burke Denby's domestic affairs. He remembered words — illuminating words — that this woman had said to him. It could not be — And yet —

He caught his breath.

"Is he — are you —"

"I am Mrs. Burke Denby," she interrupted quietly. "You will not betray me, I know. Now, will you go, please?"

For one appalled instant he gazed straight into her eyes; then without a word he turned and left her.

He knew, a minute later, that he was saying something (he wondered afterward what it was) to Mr. Burke Denby out in the main shop. He knew, too, without looking up, that a woman and a little girl passed quietly by at the other side of the room and disappeared through the open doorway. Then, dazedly, Mr. Donald Estey looked about him. He was wondering if, after all, he had not been dreaming.

That evening he learned that it was not a dream. Freely, and with a frank confidence that touched him deeply, the woman he had known as Mrs. Darling told him the whole story. He heard it with naturally varying emotions. He tried to be just, to be coolly unprejudiced. He tried also, to hide his own heartache. He even tried to be glad that she loved her husband, as she so unmistakably did.

"And you'll tell him now, of course — where you are," he said, when she had finished.

"No, no! I can't do that."

"But do you think that is — right?"

"I am sure it is."

"But if your husband wants you —"

"He does n't want me."

"Are you sure?"

"Very sure."

A curious look came to the man's eyes, a grim smile to his lips.

"Er" — he hesitated a little — "you don't want to forget that — er — you have long ago qualified for — that *understudy*. You remember that — *I* wanted you."

The rich color that flamed into her face told that she fully understood what he meant, yet she shook her head vehemently.

"No, no! Ah, please, don't jest about — that. I was very much in earnest — indeed, I was! And I thought then — that I really could — could — But I understand — lots of things now that I never understood before. It is really all for Betty that I am working now. I want to make *her* — what he would want her to be."

"Nonsense, my dear woman! As if you yourself were not the most —"

She stopped him with a gesture. Her eyes had grown very serious.

"I don't want you to talk that way, please. I would rather think — just of Betty."

"But what about — him?"

"I don't know." Her eyes grew fathomless. She turned them toward the window. "Of course I think and think and think. And of course I wonder — how it's all coming out. I'm sure I'm doing right now, and I think — I was doing right — then."

"Then?"

"When I went away — at the first. I can't see how I could have done anything else, as things were. Some way, all along, I've felt as if I were traveling a — a long road, and that on each side was a tall hedge. I can't look over it, nor through it. I can't even look ahead — very far. The road turns — so often. But there have never been any crossroads — there's never been any other way I could take, as I looked at it. Don't you see, Mr. Estey?"

"Yes, I think I see." The old baffled pain had come back to his eyes, but she did not seem to notice it. Her gaze had drifted back to the window.

"And so I feel that now I'm still on that road and that it's leading — somewhere; and some day I shall know. Until then, there is n't anything I can do — don't you see? — there is n't anything I can do but to keep — straight ahead. There really is n't, Mr. Estey."

"No, I suppose there is n't," said Mr. Donald Estey, rising to his feet with a long sigh.

CHAPTER XVII

PINK TEAS TO FLIGHTY BLONDES

One by one the years slipped by, swiftly, with little change. In Boston, the doctor, trying not to count them, still had not forgotten. From Helen, through his sister, came glowing accounts of concerts, lectures, travels, and language-lessons for herself and Betty. From Dalton, both directly and indirectly, began to come reports of a new gayety at the old Denby Mansion. Dinners and house-parties, and even a ball or two, figured in the reports.

Vexed and curious, the doctor — who had, of late, refused most of his invitations to Dalton — took occasion, between certain trips of his own, to go up to the little town, to see for himself the meaning of this, to him, unaccountable phase of the situation.

There was a big reception at Denby Mansion on the evening of the day of his arrival. The hotel parlor and office were abuzz with stories of the guests, decorations, and city caterer. There came to the doctor's ears, too, sundry rumors — some vague, others unpleasantly explicit — concerning a pretty little blonde widow, who was being frequently seen these days in the company of Burke Denby, the son.

"Of course he'd have to get a divorce — but he could do that easy," overheard the doctor in the

corridor. "His wife ran away, did n't she, years ago? I heard she did."

Uninvited and unheralded, the doctor attended the reception. Passing up the old familiar walk, he came to an unfamiliar, garish blaze of lights, a riot of color and perfume, a din of shrieking violins, the swish of silken skirts, and the peculiarly inane babble that comes from a multitude of chattering tongues.

Gorgeous lackeys reached unfamiliar hands for his hat and coat, and the doctor was nearly ready to turn and flee the delirium of horror, when he suddenly almost laughed aloud at sight of the half-perplexed, half-terrified, wholly disgusted face of Benton. At that moment the old manservant's eyes met his own, and the doctor's eyes grew suddenly moist at the beatific joy which illumined that harassed, anxious old face.

Regardless of the trailing silks and billowing tulle between them, Benton leaped to his side.

"Praise be, if it ain't Dr. Gleason!" he exulted, incoherent, but beaming.

"Yes; but what is this, Benton?" laughed the doctor. "What is the meaning of all this?"

The old butler rolled his eyes.

"Blest if I know, sir — indeed, I don't. But I'm thinking it's gone crazy I am. And sometimes I think maybe the master and young Master Burke, too, are going crazy with me. I do, sir!"

"I can well imagine it, Benton," smiled the doctor dryly, as he began to make his way toward the big

drawing-room where John Denby and his son were receiving their guests.

The doctor could find no cause to complain of his welcome. It was cordial and manifestly sincere. He was introduced at once as an old and valued friend, and he soon found himself the center of a plainly admiring group. It was very evidently soon whispered about that he was *the* Dr. Frank Gleason of archæological and Arctic fame; and his only difficulty, after his first introduction, was to find any time for his own observations and reflections. He contrived, however, in spite of his embarrassing popularity, to see something of his hosts. He talked with them, when possible, and he watched them with growingly troubled eyes.

Many times that evening he saw the mask drop over John Denby's face. Twice he saw a slow turning away as of ineffable weariness. Once he saw a spasm as of pain twitch his lips; and he noted the quick, involuntary lifting of his hand to his side. He saw that usually, however, the master of Denby House stood tall and straight and handsome, with the cordial, genial smile of a perfect host.

As to Burke — it was when the doctor was watching Burke that the trouble in his eyes grew deepest. True, on Burke's face there was no mask of inscrutability, in his eyes was no weariness, on his lips no quick spasm of pain. He was gay, alert, handsome, and apparently happy. Nevertheless, the frown on the doctor's face did not diminish.

There was a look of too much wine — slight, pernaps, but unmistakable — on Burke Denby's face, that the doctor did not like. The doctor also did not like the way Burke devoted himself to the blonde young woman who was so eternally at his elbow.

This was the widow, of course. The doctor surmised this at once. Besides, he had met her. Her name was Mrs. Carrolton, and Mrs. Carrolton was the name he had heard so frequently in the hotel. The doctor did not like the looks of Mrs. Carrolton. She was beautiful, undeniably, in a way; but her blue eyes were shifting, and her mouth, when in repose, had hard lines. She was not the type of woman he liked to have Burke with, and he would not have supposed she was the sort of woman that Burke himself would care for. And to see him now, hanging upon her every word —

With a gesture of disgust the doctor turned his back and stalked to the farther side of the room, much to the surprise of a vapid young woman, to whom (he remembered when it was too late) he had been supposed to be talking.

A little later, in the dining-room, where he had passed so many restful hours with Burke and his father, about the softly lighted table, the doctor now, in the midst of a chattering, thronging multitude, attempted to keep his own balance, and that of a tiny, wobbly plate, intermittently heaped with salads, sandwiches, cakes, and creams, which he was supposed to eat, but which he momentarily and terri-

fyingly expected to deposit upon a silken gown or a spotless shirt-front.

The doctor was one of the first of John Denby's guests to make his adieus. He had decided suddenly that he must get away, quite away, from the sight of Burke and the little widow. Otherwise he should say something — a very strong something; and, for obvious reasons, he really could say — nothing.

Disgusted, frightened, annoyed, and aggrieved, he went home the next morning. To his sister he said much. He could talk to his sister. He gave first a full account of what he had seen and heard in Dalton, omitting not one detail. Then, wrathfully, he reproached her: —

"So you see what's come of your foolishness. Burke is n't building bridges for the Hottentots now. He 's giving pink teas to flighty blondes."

Mrs. Thayer laughed softly.

"But that's only another way of trying to get away from himself, Frank," she argued.

"Yes, but I notice he is n't trying to get away from the widow," he snapped.

A disturbed frown came to the lady's face.

"I know." She bit her lips. "I *am* a little worried at that, Frank, I'll own. I've wondered, often, if — if there was ever any danger of something like that happening."

"Well, you would n't wonder any longer, if you should see Mrs. Nellie Carrolton," observed the doctor, with terse significance.

There was a moment's silence; then, sharply, the doctor spoke again.

"I'm going to write to Helen."

"Oh, Frank!"

"I am. I've got to. I don't think it's right not to."

"But what shall you — tell her?"

"That she'd better come home and look after her property; if she does n't, she's likely to lose it. That's what I'm going to tell her."

"Oh, Frank!" murmured his distressed sister again; but she made no further demur. And that night the letter went.

In due course came the answer. It was short, but very much to the point. The doctor read it, and said a sharp something behind his teeth. Without another word he handed the note to his sister. And this is what she read: —

Dear Dr. Gleason: —

He is n't my property. I can't lose him, for I have n't him to lose. He took himself away from me years ago. If ever I'm to win him back, I must *win* him — not compel him. If he thinks he's found some one else — all the more reason why I can't come back now, until he *knows* whether he wants her or not. But if I came now, and he should want her — Really, Dr. Gleason, I don't want the same man to tell me twice to — go.

HELEN D.

"Hm-m; just about what I expected she'd say," commented the doctor's sister tranquilly, as she laid the letter down.

"Oh, you women!" flung out the doctor, springing to his feet and turning wrathfully on his heel.

The doctor was relieved, but not wholly eased in his mind some days later when he heard indirectly that Denby Mansion was closed, and that the Denbys were off again to some remote corner of the world.

"Well, anyhow, the widow is n't with him now," he comforted himself aloud.

"Building bridges for the Hottentots again?" smiled his sister.

"Yes. Australia this time."

"Hm-m; that's nice and far," mused the lady.

"Oh, yes, it's far, all right," growled the doctor, somewhat belligerently. "Anyhow, it's too far for the widow, thank Heaven!"

The doctor went himself "far" before the month was out. Already his plans were made for a six months' trip with a research party to his pet hunting-ground — the grotto land of northern Spain. Once more the calmness of silence and absence left Edith Thayer with only Helen Denby's occasional letters to remind her of Burke Denby and his matrimonial problem.

CHAPTER XVIII

A LITTLE BUNCH OF DIARIES

It was three years before the doctor went up to Dalton again. It was on a sad errand this time. John Denby had died suddenly, and after an hour's hesitation, the doctor went up to the funeral.

There were no garish lights and shrieking violins to greet him as he passed once more up the long, familiar walk. The warm September sun touched lovingly the old brass knocker, and peeped behind the stately colonial pillars of the long veranda. It gleamed for a moment on the bald heads of the somber-coated men filing slowly through the wide doorway, and it tried to turn to silver the sable crape hanging at the right of the door.

Not until that evening, after the funeral, did the doctor have the opportunity for more than a formal word of greeting and sympathy with Burke Denby. He had been shocked in the afternoon at the changes in the young man's face; but he was more so when, at eight o'clock, he called at the house.

He found Burke alone in the library — the library whose every book and chair and curio spoke with the voice of the man who was gone — the man who had loved them so well.

Burke himself, to the doctor, looked suddenly old and worn, and infinitely weary of life. He did not

at once speak of his father. But when he did speak of him, a little later, he seemed then to want to talk of nothing else. Things that his father had done and said, his little ways, his likes and dislikes, the hours of delight they had passed together, the trips they had taken, even the tiddledywinks and Mother Goose of childhood came in for their share. On and on until far into the night he talked, and the doctor listened, with a word now and then of sympathy or appreciation; but with a growing ache in his heart.

"You have been, indeed, a wonderful father and son," he said at last unsteadily.

"There was never another like us." The son's voice was very low.

There was a moment's silence. The doctor, his beseeching eyes on the younger man's half-averted face, was groping in his mind for the right words to introduce the subject which all the evening had been at the door of his lips — Helen. He felt that now, with Burke's softened heart to lend lenience, and with his lonely life in prospect to plead the need of companionship, was the time, if ever, that an appeal for Helen might be successful. But the right words of introduction had not come to him when Burke himself began to speak again.

"And it's almost as if I'd lost both father and mother," he went on brokenly; "for dad talked so much of mother. To him she was always with us, I think. I can remember, when I was a little boy, how real she was to me. In all we did or said she

seemed to have a part. And always, all the way up, he used to talk of her — except for the time when —"

He stopped abruptly. The doctor, watching, wondered at the white compression that came suddenly to his lips. In a moment it was gone, however, and he had resumed speaking.

"Of late years, dad has seemed to talk more than ever of mother, and he spoke always as if she were with us. And now I'm alone — so utterly alone. Gleason — how ever am I going to live — without — dad!"

The doctor's heart leaped with mingled fear and elation: fear at what he was about to do; elation that his chance to do it had come. He cleared his throat and began, courageously, though not quite steadily.

"But — there's your wife, Burke. If only you —" He stopped short in dismay at the look that had come into Burke Denby's face.

"My wife! My wife! Don't speak of my wife now, man, if you want me to keep my reason! The woman who brought more sorrow to my father than any other living being! What do you think I would n't give if I could blot out the memory of the anguish my marriage brought to dad? I can see his eyes now, when he was pleading with me — *before* it. Afterwards — Do you know what a brick dad was afterwards? Well, I'll tell you. Never by so much as a look — much less a word — has he reproached or censured me. At first he — he just put up a wall between us. But it was a wall of grief and sore hurt. It was never anger. I know that now. Then, one

day, somehow, I found that wall down, and I looked straight into dad's eyes. It was never there again — that wall. I knew, of course, that dad had never — forgotten. The hurt and grief were still there, — that I could so disobey him, disregard his wishes, — but he would not let them be a wall between us any longer. Then, when it all turned out as it did — But he never once said, 'I told you so,' nor even looked it. And he was kind and good to Helen always. But when I think how I — I, who love him so — brought to him all that grief and anguish of heart, I — My wife, indeed! Gleason, I never want to see her face again, or hear her name spoken!"

"But your — your child," stammered the dismayed doctor faintly.

A shadow of quick pain crossed the other's face.

"I know. And that's another thing that grieved dad. He was fond of his little granddaughter. He used to speak of her, often, till I begged him not to. She's mine, of course; but she's Helen's, too, — and she is being brought up by Helen — not me. I can imagine what she's being taught — about her father," he finished bitterly.

"Oh, but I'm sure — I know she's —" With a painful color the doctor, suddenly warned from within just in time, came to a frightened pause.

Burke, however, lifting a protesting hand, changed the subject abruptly; and the relieved doctor was glad, for once, not to have him wish to talk longer of his missing wife and daughter.

Very soon the doctor said good-night and left the house. But his heart was heavy.

"Perhaps, after all," he sighed to himself, "it was n't just the time to get him to listen to reason about Helen — when it was his runaway marriage that had so grieved his father years ago; and his father now — just gone."

From many lips, before he left town the next morning, Dr. Gleason learned much of the life and doings of the Denbys during the past few years. Perhaps the death of John Denby had made the Dalton tongues garrulous. At all events they were nothing loath to talk; and the doctor, eager to obtain anything that would enable him to understand Burke Denby, was nothing loath to listen.

"Yes, sir, he hain't been well for years — John Denby hain't," related one old man into the doctor's attentive, sympathetic ears. "And I ain't sayin' I wonder, with all he's been through. But you said you was a friend of his, did n't ye?"

The doctor inclined his head.

"I am, indeed, an old friend of the family."

"Well, it's likely, then, you know something yourself of what's happened — though 'course you hain't lived here to see it all. First, ye know, there was his son's marriage. And that cut the old man all up — runaway, and not what the family wanted at all. *You* know that, of course. But they made the best of it, apparently, after a while, and young Denby took hold first-rate at the Works. Right down to

the beginnin' he went, too, — overalls and day wages. And he done well — first-rate! — but it must 'a' galled some. Why, once, fur a spell, he worked *under my son* — he did. The men liked him, too, when they got over their grinnin' and nonsense, and see he was in earnest. *You* know what a likely chap young Denby *can* be, when he wants to."

"None better!" smiled the doctor.

"Yes. Well, to resume and go on. Somethin' happened one day — in his domestic affairs, I mean. The pretty young wife and kid lit out for parts unknown. And the son went back to his dad. (He and his dad always was more like pals than anythin' else.) Some says he sent her away — the wife, I mean. Some says she runned away herself. Like enough *you* know the rights of it."

There was a suggestion of a pause, and a sly, half-questioning glance; but at the absolute non-committalism of the other's face, the narrator went on hastily.

"Well, whatever was the rights or wrongs of it, she went, and hain't been seen in these 'ere parts since, as I know of. Not that I *should* know her if I did see her, howsomever! Well, that was a dozen — yes, fourteen years ago, I guess, and the old man hain't been the same since. He hain't been the same since the boy's marriage, for that matter.

"Well, at first, after she went, the Denbys went kitin' off on one o' them trips o' theirn, that they're always takin'; then they come home and opened up the old house, and things went on about as they used

to 'fore young Denby was married. But the old man fell sick — first on the trip, then afterwards, once or twice. He wa'n't well; but that did n't hinder his goin' off again. This time they went with one of their bridges. Always, before, they'd let Henry or Grosset manage the job; but this time they went themselves. After that they went lots — to South America, Africa, Australia, and I don't know where. They seemed restless and uneasy — both of 'em.

"Then they begun ter bring folks home with 'em: chaps who wore purple silk socks and neckties, and looked as if they'd never done a stroke of work in their lives; and women with high heels and false hair. My, but there was gay doin's there! Winters there was balls and parties and swell feeds with nigger waiters from Boston, and even the dishes and what they et come from there, too, sometimes, they say. Summers they rode in hayracks and autymobiles, and danced outdoors on the grass — shows, you know. And they *was* a show with the women barefooted and barearmed, and — and not much on generally. My wife seen 'em once, and she was that shocked she did n't get over it for a month. She said she was brought up to keep a modest dress on her that had a decent waist and skirt to it. But my Bill (he's been in Boston two years now) says it's a pageant and Art, and all right. That you can do it in pageants when you can't just walkin' along the street, runnin' into the neighbors'. See?"

"I see," nodded the doctor gravely.

"Oh, well, of course they did n't go 'round like that all the time. They played that thing lots where they have them little balls and queer-looking sticks to knock 'em with. They played it all over Pike's Hill and the Durgin pasture in Old Dalton; and they got my grandson to be a — a — "

"Caddie?" hazarded the doctor.

"Yes; that's what they called it. And he made good money, too, — doin' nothin'. Wish't they'd want me for one! Well, as I was sayin', they had all this comp'ny, an' more an' more of it; and they give receptions an' asked the hull town, sometimes. My wife went, and my darter. They said it was fine and grand, and all that, but that they did n't believe old John liked it very well. But Mr. Burke liked it. That was easy to be seen. And there was a pretty little widder there lots, and *she* liked it. Some said as how they thought there'd be a match there, sometime, if he could get free. But I guess there wa'n't anythin' ter that. Anyhow, all of a sudden, somethin' happened. Everythin' stopped right off short — all the gay doin's and parties — and everybody went home. Then, the next thing we knew, the old house was dark and empty again, and the Denbys gone to Australia with another bridge."

"Yes, I know. I remember — that," interposed the doctor, alert and interested.

"Did you see 'em — when they come back?"

"No."

"Well, they did n't look like the same men. And

ever since they've been different, somehow. Stern and silent, with never a smile for anybody, skursley. No balls an' parties now, you bet ye! Week in and week out, jest shut up in that big silent house — never goin' out at all except to the Works! Then we heard he was sick — Mr. John. But he got better, and was out again. The end come sudden. Nobody expected that. But he was a good man — a grand good man — John Denby was!"

"He was, indeed," agreed the doctor, with a long sigh, as he turned away.

This story, with here and there a new twist and turn, the doctor heard on all sides. And always he listened attentively, hopefully, eager, if possible, to find some detail that would help him in some further plea to Burke Denby in behalf of the far-away wife. Even the women wanted to talk to him, and did, sometimes to his annoyance. Once, only, however, did his irritation get the better of his manners. It was when the woman of whom he bought his morning paper at the station newsstand, accosted him —

"Stranger in these parts, ain't ye? Come to the fun'ral, did n't ye?"

"Why — y-yes."

"Hm-m; I thought so. He was a fine man, I s'pose. Still, I did n't think much of him myself. Used to know him too well, maybe. Used to live next his son — same floor. My name's Cobb — and I used to see —" But the doctor had turned on his heel without even the semblance of an apology.

Ten minutes later he boarded the train for Boston.

To his sister again he told the story of a Dalton trip, and, as before, he omitted not one detail.

"But I can't write, of course, to Helen, now," he finished gloomily. "That is, I can't urge her coming back — not in the face of Burke's angry assertion that he never wants to see her again."

"Of course not. But don't worry, dear. I have n't given up hope, by any means. Burke worshiped his father. His heart is almost breaking now, at his loss. It is perfectly natural, under the circumstances, that he should have this intense anger toward anything that ever grieved his loved father. But wait. That's all we *can* do, anyway. I'll write to Helen, of course, and tell her of her father-in-law's death, but —"

"You would n't tell her what Burke said, Edith!"

"Oh, no, no, indeed! — unless I *have* to, Frank — unless she asks me."

But Helen did ask her. By return steamer came her letter expressing her shocked distress at John Denby's death, and asking timidly, but urgently, if, in Mrs. Thayer's opinion, it were the time now when she should come home — if she would be welcomed by her husband. To this, of course, there was but one answer possible; and reluctantly Mrs. Thayer gave it.

"And to think," groaned the doctor, "that when now, for the first time, Helen is willing to come, we have to tell her — she can't!"

"I know, but" — Edith Thayer resolutely blinked off the tears — "I have n't given up yet. Just wait."

And the doctor waited. It was, indeed, as his sister said, all that he could do. From time to time he went up to Dalton and made his way up the old familiar walk to have a chat with the taciturn, somber-eyed man sitting alone in the great old library. The doctor never spoke of Helen. He dared not take the risk. Burke Denby's only interests plainly were business, books, and the rare curios he and his father had collected. A Mrs. Gowing, a distant cousin, had come to be his housekeeper, but the doctor saw little of her. She seemed to be a quiet, inoffensive little woman, plainly very much in the background.

There came an evening finally, however, when, much to the doctor's beatific surprise, Burke Denby, of his own accord, mentioned his wife.

It was nearly two years after John Denby's death. The doctor had run up to Dalton for an overnight visit, and had noticed at once a peculiar restlessness in his host's manner, an odd impatience of voice and gesture. Then, abruptly, in answer to the doctor's own assertion that Burke needed something to get him away from his constant brooding in the old library, —

"Need something?" he exclaimed. "Of course I need something! I need my wife and child. I need to live a normal life like other men. I need — But what's the use?" he finished, with outflung hands.

"I know; but — you, yourself —" By a supreme effort the doctor was keeping himself from shouting aloud with joy.

"Oh, yes, I know it's all my own fault," cut in

Burke crisply. "You can't tell me anything new on that score, that I have n't told myself. Yes, and I know I have n't even been willing to have her name spoken," he went on recklessly, answering the amazement in the doctor's face. "For that matter, I don't know why I'm talking like this now — unless it's because I've always said to you more than I've said to any one else — except dad — about Helen. And now, after being such a cad, it seems almost — due to her that I should say — something. Besides, does n't somebody say somewhere that confession is good for the soul?"

There was a quizzical smile on his lips, but there was no smile in his eyes.

The doctor nodded dumbly. Afraid of saying the wrong thing, he dared not open his lips. But, terrified at the long silence that followed, he finally ventured unsteadily: —

"But why — this sudden change, Burke?"

"It's not so sudden as you think." Burke's eyes, gloomily fixed on the opposite wall, did not turn as he spoke. "It's been coming gradually for a long time. I can see that now. Still, the real eye-opener finally came from — mother."

"*Your — mother!*"

"Yes, her diary — or, rather, diaries. I found them a month ago among father's things. I can't tell you what was in them. I would n't, of course, if I could. They're too — sacred. Perhaps you think even I should not have read them; perhaps I should n't.

But I did, and I'm glad I did; and I believe she'd have wanted me to.

"Of course, at first, when I picked one of them up, I did n't know what it was. Then I saw my name, and I read — page after page. I was a baby — her baby. Gleason, can you imagine what it would be to look deep down into the soul of a good woman and read there all her love, hopes, prayers, and ambitions for her boy — and then suddenly realize that you yourself were that boy?"

There was no answer; and Burke, evidently expecting none, went on with the rush of abandonment that told of words suddenly freed from long restraint.

"I took up then the first one — the diary she kept that first year of her marriage; and if I had felt small and mean and unworthy before — On and on I read; and as I read, I began to see, dimly, what marriage means — for a woman. They were very poor then. Father was the grandson of the younger, runaway son, Joel, and had only his trade and his day wages. They lived in a shabby little cottage on Mill Street, long since destroyed. This house belonged to the other branch of the family, and was occupied by a rich old man and his daughter. Mother was gently reared, and was not used to work. Those first years of poverty and privation must have been wickedly hard for her. But the little diaries carried no complaints. They did carry weariness, often, and sometimes a pitiful terror lest she be not strong enough for what was before her, and so bring disap-

pointment and grief to 'dear John.' But always, for 'dear John,' I could see there was to be nothing but encouragement and a steadfast holding forth of high aims and the assurance of ultimate success.

"Then, one by one, came the babies, with all the agony and fears and hopes they brought with them. Three came and slipped away into the great unknown before I came — to stay. About that time father's patents began to bring success, and soon the money was pouring in. They bought this house. It had been one of their dreams that they would buy it. The old man had died, and the daughter had married and moved away, and the house had been for sale for some time. So they bought it, and soon after I was born we came here to live. Then, when I was four years old, mother died.

"That is the story — the bald story. But that does n't tell you anything of what those diaries were to me. In the light they shed I saw my own marriage — and I w ashamed. I never thought of marriage before from Helen's standpoint. I never thought what *she* had to suffer and endure, and adapt herself to. I know now. Of course, very soon after our marriage, I realized that she and I were n't suited to each other. But what of it? I had married her. I had effectually prevented her from finding happiness with any other man; yet it did n't seem to occur to me that I had thereby taken on myself the irrevocable duty of trying to make her happy. I have no doubt that my ways and aims and likes and dislikes annoyed

her as much as hers did me. But it never occurred to me that my soft greens and browns and Beethoven harmonies got on her nerves just exactly as her pinks and purples and ragtime got on mine. I was never in the habit of looking at anybody's happiness but my own; and *I* was n't happy. So I let fling, regardless."

Burke paused, and drew a long sigh. The doctor, puffing slowly at his cigar, sedulously kept his face the other way. The doctor, in his fancy, had already peopled the old room with a joyous Helen and Dorothy Elizabeth; and he feared, should he turn, that his face would sing a veritable Hallelujah Chorus — to the consequent amazement of his host.

"Mother had trials of her own — lots of them," resumed Burke, after a moment's silence. "She even had some not unlike mine, I believe, for I think I could read between the lines that dad was more than a bit careless at times in manner and speech compared to the polished ways of the men of her family and social circle. But mother neither whined nor ran away. She just smiled and kept bravely straight ahead; and by and by they were under her feet, where they belonged — all those things that plagued. But I — I both whined and ran away — because I did n't like the way my wife ate her soup and spread her bread. They seem so small now — all those little ways I hated — small beside the big things that really counted. Do you know? I believe if more people would stop making the little things big and the big things little, there'd be a whole heap more happiness

lying around in this old world! And Helen — poor Helen! She tried — I know she tried. Lots of times, when I was reading in the diaries what mother said about dad, — how she must n't let him get discouraged or downhearted; how she must tell him she just knew he was going to succeed, — lots of times then I'd think of Helen. Helen used to talk that way to me at the first! I wonder now if Helen kept a diary! And I can't help wondering if, supposing I had been a little less apt to notice the annoyances, and a little more inclined to see the good — Bah! There, there, old man, forgive me," he broke off, with a shrug. "I did n't mean to run on like this. I really did n't — for all the world like the heart-to-heart advice to the lovelorn in a daily news column!"

"I'm glad you did, Burke." The doctor's carefully controlled voice expressed cheery interest; that was all. "And now what do you propose to do?"

"Do? How? What do you mean?"

"Why, about — your wife, of course."

"Nothing. There's nothing I can do. And that's the pity of it. She will go on, of course, to the end of her life, thinking me a cad and a coward."

"But if you could be — er — brought together again," suggested the doctor in a voice so coldly impersonal it was almost indifferent.

"Oh, yes, of course — perhaps. But that's not likely. I don't know where she is, remember; and she's not likely to come back of her own accord, after all this time. Besides, if she did, who's to guarantee

that a few old diaries have changed me from an unbearably selfish brute to a livably patient and pleasant person to have about the house? Not but what I'd jump at the chance to try, but — Well, we'll wait till I get it," he finished dryly, with a lightness that was plainly assumed.

"Well, anyway, Burke, you've never found any one else!" The Hallelujah Chorus did almost sing through the doctor's voice this time.

"No, I've been spared that, thank Heaven. There was one — a Mrs. Carrolton."

"Yes, I met her — at that reception, you know," said the doctor, answering the unspoken question.

"Oh, yes, I remember. Well, I did come near — but I pulled myself up in time. I knew, in my heart, she was n't the kind of woman — Then, too, there was Helen. It was only that I was feeling particularly reckless that fall. Besides, I know now that I've cared for Helen — the real Helen — all the time. And there *is* a real Helen, I believe, underneath it all. As I look back at them — all those years — I know that during every single one of them I've been trying to get away from myself. If it had n't been for dad — and that's the one joy I have: that I was able to be with dad. They were n't quite lost — those years, for they brought him joy."

"No, they've not been lost, Burke," said the doctor, with quiet emphasis.

Burke laughed a little grimly.

"Oh, I know what you mean, of course. I've

been 'tried as by fire' — eh? Well, I dare say I have — and I've been found woefully wanting. But enough of this!" he broke off abruptly, springing to his feet. "You don't happen to know of a young woman who has the skill of experience, the wisdom of age, the adaptability of youth, and the patience of Job all in one, do you?" he demanded.

The doctor turned with startled eyes.

"Why, Burke, after all this, you don't mean —"

"No, it's not a wife I'm looking for," interposed Burke, with a whimsical shrug. "It's a — a stenographer or private secretary, only she must be much more than the ordinary kind. I want to catalogue all this truck father and I have accumulated. She must know French and German — a little Greek and Hebrew would n't be amiss. And I want one that would be interested in this sort of thing — one who will realize she is n't handling — er — potatoes, say. My eyes are going back on me, too, and I shall want her to read to me; so I must like her voice. I don't want anything, you see," he smiled grimly.

"I should say not," laughed the doctor, rising. "But before you can give me any more necessary qualifications, I guess I'd better be going to bed."

"I don't wonder, after the harangue I've given you. But — you don't know of such a person, do you?"

"I don't."

"No, I suppose not — nor anybody else," finished Burke Denby, a profound gloom that had become habitual settling over his face.

"If I do I'll send her to you," nodded the doctor, halfway through the door. The doctor was in a hurry to get up to his room — he had a letter to write.

"Thanks," said Burke Denby, still dryly, as he waved his hand in good-night.

"Stenographer, indeed!" sang the doctor under his breath, bounding up the stairs like a boy. "Wait till he sees what I *am* going to get him!" he finished, striding down the hall and into his own room.

Before he slept the doctor wrote his letter to Helen. It was a long one, and a joyous one. It told everything that Burke had said, even to his plaintive plea for a private secretary.

There could be no doubt now, no further delay, declared the doctor. Helen would come home at once, of course. It only remained for them to decide on the mere details of just how and when. Meanwhile, when might they expect her in Boston? She would come, of course, to his sister's first; and he trusted it would be soon — very soon.

Addressing the letter to Mrs. Helen Darling, the doctor tucked it into his pocket to be mailed at the station in the morning. Then, for the few hours before rising time, he laid himself down to sleep. But he did not sleep. His brain was altogether too actively picturing the arrival of Helen Denby and her daughter at the old Denby Mansion, and the meeting between them and the master of the house. And to think that at last it was all coming out right!

CHAPTER XIX

THE STAGE IS SET

IMPATIENT as was the doctor for an answer to his letter, it came before he expected, for a cablegram told of Helen's almost immediate departure for America.

"I thought that would fetch her," he crowed to his sister. "And she'll be here just next week Wednesday. That'll get her up to Dalton before Sunday."

"Perhaps," observed Mrs. Thayer cautiously.

"No 'perhaps' to it," declared the doctor, — "if the boat gets here. You don't suppose she's going to delay any longer now, do you? Besides, is n't she starting for America about as soon as she can? Does that look as if she were losing much time?"

"No, it does n't," she admitted laughingly.

The doctor and his sister were not surprised to see a very lovely and charming Helen with the distinction and mellow maturity that the dozen intervening years had brought. Her letters had shown them something of that. But they were not prepared for the changes those same years had wrought in Dorothy Elizabeth.

To Helen, their frank start of amazement and quick interchange of glances upon first sight of the girl were like water to a long-parched throat.

"You do think she's lovely?" she whispered to the frankly staring doctor, as Mrs. Thayer welcomed the young girl.

"Lovely! She's the most beautiful thing I ever saw!" avowed the doctor, with a laughing shrug at his own extravagance.

"And she's just as sweet and dear as she is lovely," whispered back the adoring mother, as the girl turned to meet the doctor.

"You've your mother's eyes, my dear," said the doctor, very much as he had said it to the little Betty years before.

"Have I?" The girl smiled happily. "I'm so glad! I love mother's eyes."

It was not until hours later, when Betty had gone to bed, that there was any opportunity to talk over plans. Then, before the fire in the library, Helen found herself alone with the doctor and his sister.

"You see, I came almost as soon as I could," she began at once. "I did stay one day — for a wedding."

"A wedding?"

"Yes, and some one you know, too — Mr. Donald Estey."

"Really?" cried Mrs. Thayer.

"Jove! After all this time?" The doctor's eyebrows went up.

"Yes. And I'm so glad — especially glad for — for he thought once, years ago, that he cared for some one else. And I like to know he's happy — now."

"Hm-m," murmured the doctor, with a shrewd smile and a sidelong glance at his sister. "So he's happy — *now*, eh?"

"Oh, very! And she's a beautiful girl."

"As beautiful as — Betty, say?" The doctor's voice was teasing.

A wonderful light came to Helen's face.

"You do think she's beautiful, don't you?" she cried, with a smile that told she needed no answer.

"She's a dear — in every way," avowed Mrs. Thayer.

"And to think of all this coming to Burke Denby, without even a turn of his hand," envied the doctor. "Lucky dog! And to get you *both!* He does n't deserve it!"

"But he is n't going to get us both!" Helen's eyes were twinkling, but her mouth showed suddenly firm lines.

The doctor wheeled sharply.

"What do you mean? Surely, *now* you are n't going to — to —" He stopped helplessly.

"He's going to get *her* — but not me."

"Oh, come, come, Helen, my dear!" protested two dismayed voices.

But Helen shook her head decidedly.

"Listen. I've got it all planned. You said he wanted a — a sort of private secretary or stenographer, did n't you?"

"Why, y-yes."

"Well, I'm going to send Betty."

"Betty!"

"Certainly. She can fill the position — you need n't worry about that. She's eighteen, you know, and she's really very self-reliant and capable. She does n't

understand shorthand, of course; but she can write his letters for him, just the same, and in three or four languages, if he wants her to. She can typewrite. Mr. Reynolds got a typewriter for the girls long ago. And she *loves* to fuss over old books and curios. She and Gladys have spent days in those old London shops."

"A real Denby digger — eh?" smiled the doctor.

"Yes. And I've been so glad she was interested — like her father."

"But you don't mean you're going to give your daughter up," cried Mrs. Thayer, aghast, "and not go yourself!"

"You could n't! Besides, as if Burke would stand for that," cut in the doctor.

"But he is n't going to know she *is* his daughter," smiled Helen.

"Not know she is his daughter!" echoed two voices, in stupefaction.

"No — not yet. She'll be his private secretary. That is all. I'm relying on you to — er — apply for the situation for her." Helen's eyes were merry.

"Oh, nonsense! This is too absurd for words," spluttered the doctor.

"I don't think so."

"His own daughter writing his letters for him, and living with him day by day, and he not to know it? Bosh! Sounds like a plot from a shilling shocker!"

"Does it? Well, I ought not to mind that, ought I? — you know 't was a book in the first place that

set me to making myself 'swell' and 'grand,' sir." In Helen's eyes was still twinkling mischief.

"Oh, but, my dear," remonstrated Mrs. Thayer with genuine concern. "I do think this is impossible."

The expression on Helen Denby's face changed instantly. Her eyes grew very grave, but luminously tender. Her lips trembled a little.

"People, dear people, if you'll listen just a minute I think I can convince you," she begged. "I have it all planned out. Betty and I will go to Dalton and find a quiet little home somewhere. Oh, I shall keep well out of sight — never fear," she nodded, in reply to the quick doubt in the doctor's eyes. "Betty shall go every morning to her father's house, and — I'm not afraid of Betty. He will love her. He can't help it. And he will see how dear and sweet and good she is. Then, by and by, he shall know that she is his — his very own."

"But — but Betty herself! Can she act her part in this remarkable scheme?" demanded the doctor.

"She won't be acting a part. She'll just be acting herself. She is not to know anything except that she is his secretary."

"Impossible!" ejaculated two voices.

"I don't think so. Anyway, it's worth trying; and if it works it'll mean — everything." The last word was so low it was scarcely above a whisper.

"But — yourself, my dear," pleaded Mrs. Thayer. "Where do you come in? What part have you in this — play?"

The rich red surged from neck to brow. The doctor and his sister could see that, though they could not see Helen Denby's face. It was turned quite away. There was a moment's silence; then, a little breathlessly, came the answer.

"I — don't — know. I suppose that will be — the 'curtain,' won't it? And — I've never been sure of the ending — yet. But —" She hesitated; then suddenly she turned, her eyes shining and deeply tender. "Don't you see? It's the only way, after all. I can't very well go up to Dalton and ring his doorbell and say, 'Here, behold your wife and daughter. Won't you please take us in?' — can I? Though at first, when I heard of his father's death and thought of him so lonely there, I did want to do — just that. But I knew that was n't best, even before your letter came telling me — what he said.

"But now — why, this is just what I've wanted from the first — to show Betty to him, some time, when he did n't dream who she was. I wanted to *know* that he was n't — ashamed of her. And this (his wanting a secretary) gave me a better chance than I ever thought I could have. Why, people, dear people, don't you see? — with this I shan't mind now one bit all these long, long years of waiting. Won't you help me — please? I can't, of course, do it without your help."

The doctor threw up both his hands — his old gesture of despair.

"Help you? Of course we'll help you, just as we

did before — to get the moon, if you ask for it. I feel like a comic opera and a movie farce all in one; but never mind. I'll do it. Now, what is it I *am* to do?"

Helen relaxed into such radiant joyousness and relief, that she looked almost like the girl Burke Denby had married nineteen years before.

"You dear! I knew you would!" she breathed.

"Yes; but what is it?" he groaned in mock despair. "Speak out. I want to know the worst at once. What *am* I to do?"

"Please, you're to go up to Dalton and tell Mr. Burke Denby you think you've found a young woman who will make him an excellent secretary. Then, if he consents to try her, you're to find a little furnished apartment on a nice, quiet street, not too far from the Denby Mansion, of course, where we can live. Then I'd like a note of introduction for Betty to take to her father: she's the daughter of an old friend whom you've known for years — see? — and you are confident she will give satisfaction. That's all. Now, I'm sure — is n't all that quite — easy?"

"Oh, very easy, — very easy, indeed!" replied the doctor, with another groan. "You little witch! I declare I believe you'll carry this absurd, preposterous thing through to a triumphant finish, after all."

"Thank you. I *knew* you would n't fail me," smiled Helen, with tear-wet eyes.

"But, my dear, I don't think yet that everything is quite clear," demurred Mrs. Thayer. "How about Betty? Just what does Betty know of her father?"

A look very like fear crossed the bright face opposite. "She knows nothing, of course, of — of my leaving home and the cause of it. I've never told her anything of her father except to hold him up as a symbol of everything good and lovable. When she was a little girl, you know, I could always do anything with her by just telling her that daddy wanted it so."

"But where does she think he is? Now that she is older, she must have asked some questions," murmured Mrs. Thayer.

Helen shook her head. A faint smile came to her lips. "She has n't; but I've been so afraid she would, and I've been dreading it always. Then one day Mrs. Reynolds told me something Betty said to her. Since then I've felt a little easier."

"Does Mrs. Reynolds know who you really are?" interposed the doctor.

"Yes, oh, yes. I told her long ago — even before she took me to London with her, in fact. I thought she ought to know. I've been so glad, since, that I did. It saved me from lots of awkward moments. Besides, it enabled her to be all the more help to me."

"But what was it Betty said to her?" asked Mrs. Thayer.

"Oh, yes; I did n't tell you, did I? It was this. She asked Mrs. Reynolds one day: 'Did you ever know my father?' And of course Mrs. Reynolds said, 'No.' Then Betty said: 'He is dead, you know. Oh, mother never told me so, in words; but I understand that he is, of course. She just used to say that I

must n't ask for daddy. He could n't be with us now. That was all. At first, when I was little, I thought he was away on a journey. Then, when I got older, I realized it was just mother's beautiful way of putting it. So now I like to think of him as being just away on a journey. And of *course* I never say anything to mother. But I do wish I could have known him. He must have been so fine and splendid!' "

"The dear child!" murmured Mrs. Thayer.

The doctor turned on his heel and walked over to the window abruptly.

There was a moment's silence; then softly, Helen said, as she rose to her feet: "So you see now I'm not worrying so much for fear she will question me; and I shall be so happy, by and by, when she finds that daddy has been, after all, only on a journey."

Edith Thayer, alone with her brother, after Helen Denby had gone upstairs, wiped her eyes.

It was the doctor who spoke first.

"If Burke Denby does n't fall head over heels in love with that little woman and *know* he's got the dearest treasure on earth, I — I shall do it myself," he declared savagely. He, too, was wiping his eyes.

His sister laughed tremulously.

"Well, I am in love with her — and I'm not ashamed to own it," she declared. "How altogether dear and charming and winsome she is! And when you think — what these years have done for her!"

CHAPTER XX

THE CURTAIN RISES

It was, indeed, quite "easy" — surprisingly so, as the doctor soon found out. Not without some trepidation, however, had he taken the train for Dalton the next morning and presented his proposition to the master of Denby House.

"I think I've found your private secretary," he began blithely, hoping that his pounding heart-throbs did not really sound like a drum.

"You have? Good! What's her name? Somebody you know?" questioned Burke Denby, with a show of interest.

"Yes. She's a Miss Darling, and I've known her family for years." (The doctor gulped and swallowed a bit convulsively. The doctor was feeling that the very walls of the room must be shouting aloud his secret — but he kept bravely on.) "She does n't know shorthand, but she can typewrite, and she's very quick at taking dictation in long hand, I fancy; and she knows several languages, I believe. I'm sure you'll find her capable and trustworthy in every way."

"Very good! Sounds well, sure," smiled Burke. "And here, for my needs, speed and shorthand are not so necessary. I do only personal business at the house. What salary does she want?"

So unexpected and disconcerting was this quite natural question that the doctor, totally unprepared for it, nearly betrayed himself by his confusion.

"Eh? Er — ah — oh, great Scott! Why did n't they — I might have known —" he floundered. Then, sharply, he recovered himself. "Well, really," he laughed lightly, "I'm a crackerjack at applying for a job, and no mistake! I quite forgot to ask what salary she did expect. But I don't believe that will matter materially. She'll come for what is right, I'm sure; and you'll be willing to pay that."

"Oh, yes; it does n't matter. I'll be glad to give her a trial, anyway; and if she's all you crack her up to be I'll pay her *more* than what's right. When can she come? Where does she live?"

"Well, she's going to live here in Dalton," evaded the doctor cautiously. "She's not here yet; but she and her mother are coming — er — next week, I believe. Better not count on her beginning work till the first, though, perhaps. That'll be next week Thursday. I should think they ought to be — er — settled by that time." The doctor drew a long breath, much after the fashion of a man who has been crossing a bit of particularly thin ice.

"All right. Send her along. The sooner the better," nodded Burke, the old listless weariness coming back to his eyes. "I certainly need — some one."

"Oh, well, I reckon you'll have — some one, now," caroled the doctor, so jubilantly that it brought a frown of mild wonder to Burke Denby's face.

Later, the doctor, still jubilant and confident, hurried down the Denby walk intent on finding the "modest little apartment" for Helen.

"Oh, well, I don't know!" he exulted to himself, wagging his head like a cocksure boy. "This comic-opera-farce affair may not be so bad, after all. Anyhow, I've made my first exit — and have n't spilled anything yet. Now for scene second!"

Finding a satisfactory little furnished apartment, not too far from the Denby home, proved to be no small task. But by sacrificing a little on the matter of distance, the doctor was finally enabled to engage one that he thought would answer.

"Only she'll have to ride back and forth, I'm afraid," he muttered to himself, as he started for the station to take his train. "Anyhow, I'm glad I did n't take that one on Dale Street. She'd meet too many ghosts of old memories on Dale Street."

Buying his paper at the newsstand in the station, the doctor himself encountered the ghost of a memory. But he could not place it until the woman behind the counter cried: —

"There! I thought I'd seen you before. You come two years ago to the Denby fun'ral, now, did n't ye? I tell ye it takes me ter remember faces." Then, as he still frowned perplexedly, she explained: "Don't ye remember? My name's Cobb. I used ter live—" But the doctor had turned away impatiently. He remembered now. This was the woman who did n't "think much of old Denby" herself.

On Monday Helen Denby and her daughter went to Dalton. At Helen's urgent insistence the doctor refrained from accompanying them.

"I don't want you to be seen with us," Helen had protested.

"But why not?" he had argued rebelliously. "I thought I was a friend of your family for years."

"I know; but I — I just feel that I'd rather not have you with us. I prefer to go alone, please," she had begged. And perforce he had let her have her own way.

It was on a beautiful day in late September that Helen Denby and her daughter arrived at the Dalton station. Helen, fearful either that her features would be recognized, or that she would betray by word or look her knowledge of the place, and so bring an amazed question to Betty's lips, had drawn a heavy veil over her face. Betty, cheerily interested in everything she saw, kept up a running fire of comment.

"And so this is Dalton! What a funny little station — and for so big a place, too! It seemed to be big, as we came into it. Is Dalton a large town, mother?"

"Why, rather large. It used to be — that is, it must be a good deal over fifteen thousand now, I suppose," murmured the mother, speaking very unconcernedly.

"Then you've been here before?"

Helen, realizing that already she had made one mistake, suddenly became convinced that safety — and certainly tranquillity of mind — lay in telling the truth — to a certain extent.

"Oh, yes, I was here years ago. But the place is much changed, I fancy," she answered lightly. "Come, dear, we'll take a taxi. But first I want a paper. I want to look at the advertisements for a maid, and —"

She had almost reached the newsstand when, to Betty's surprise, she turned sharply about and walked the other way.

"Why, mother, I thought you said you wanted a paper," cried Betty, hurrying after her and plucking at her arm.

"But I did n't — I don't — I've changed my mind. I won't get it, after all, just now. I'd rather hurry right home."

She spoke rapidly, almost feverishly; and Betty noticed that she engaged the first cabby she saw, and seemed impatiently anxious to be off. What she did not see, however, was that twice her mother covertly glanced back at the newsstand, and that her face behind the veil was gray-white and terrified. And what Betty did not know was that, as the taxi started, her mother whispered frenziedly to herself:—

"That was — that was — Mrs. Cobb. She's older and grayer, but she's got Mrs. Cobb's eyes and nose. And the wart! I'd know that wart anywhere. And to think how near I came to *speaking* to her!"

It was a short drive, and Helen and her daughter were soon in the apartment the doctor had found for them. To Helen it looked like a haven of refuge, indeed. Her near encounter with Mrs. Cobb at the

station had somewhat unnerved her. But with four friendly walls to protect her, and with no eyes but her daughter's in sight, Helen drew a long breath of relief, and threw off her veil, hat, and coat.

"Oh, is n't this dear!" she exclaimed, sinking into a chair, and looking admiringly about the pretty rooms. "And just think — this is home, our home! Oh, dearie, we're going to be happy here, I'm sure."

"Of course we are! And it is lovely here." The words were all right, but voice and eyes showed a trace of uneasiness.

"Why, dearie, *don't* you like it?" asked the girl's mother anxiously.

"Yes, oh, yes; I like it all — *here.* It's only that I was thinking, all of a sudden, about that Mr. Denby. I was wondering if I should like it there — with him."

"I think you will, dear."

"But it'll all be so new and — and different from what I've been used to. Don't you see?"

"Of course, my dear; but that's the way we grow — by encountering things new and different, you see. But come, we've got lots of things new and different right here that we have n't even seen yet. I'm going hunting for a wardrobe," finished the mother lightly, springing to her feet and picking up her hat and coat.

It was a pretty little apartment of five rooms up one flight, convenient, and tastefully furnished.

"I don't think even Burke could find fault with this," thought Helen, a bit wistfully, as her eyes

lingered on the soft colorings and harmonious blendings of rugs and hangings. Aloud she said: —

"Dear me! I feel just like a little girl with a new doll-house, don't you?"

"Yes; and when our trunks come, and we get our photographs and things out, it will be lovely, won't it?"

Helen, at one of the windows, gave a sudden exclamation.

"Why, Betty, from this window we can see —"

"See what?" cried Betty, hurrying to the window, as her mother's words came to an abrupt halt.

"The city, dear, so much of it, and — and all those beautiful houses over there," stammered Helen. "See that church with the big dome, and the tall spire next it; and all those trees — that must be a park," she hurried on, pointing out anything and everything but the one big old colonial house with its tall pillars that stood out so beautifully fine and clear against the green of a wide lawn on the opposite hill.

"Oh-h! what a lovely view!" exclaimed Betty, at her side. "Why, I had n't noticed it at all before, but we're on a hill ourselves, are n't we?"

"Yes, dear, — West Hill. That's what I think they used to call it."

Helen was not at the window now. She had turned back into the room with almost an indifferent air. But afterwards, when Betty was busy elsewhere, she went again to the window and stood for long minutes motionless, her eyes on the big old house on the oppo-

site hill. It was ablaze, now, for the last rays of the sun had set every window gorgeously aflame. And not until it stood again gray and cold in the gathering dusk did Helen turn back into the room; and then it was with tear-wet eyes and a long sigh.

Getting settled was much the same thing that getting settled is always apt to be. There were the same first scrappy, unsatisfying meals, the same slow-emerging order from seemingly hopeless confusion, the same shifting of one's belongings from shelf to drawer and back again. In this case, however, there were only the trunks and their contents to be disposed of, and the getting settled was, after all, a short matter.

Much to Betty's disapproval, her mother early announced her intention of doing without a maid.

"Oh, but, mother, dear, you should n't. Besides, I thought you said you were going to have one."

"I thought at first I would, but I've changed my mind. There will be just us two, and I'd rather have a stout woman come twice a week for the laundry and cleaning. With you gone all day I shall need something — to take up my mind."

Betty said more, much more; but to no purpose. Her mother was still obdurate. It was then that into Betty's mind came a shrewd suspicion, but she did not give it voice. When evening came, however, she did ask some questions. It was the night before she was to go for the first time to take up her work.

"Mother, how did we happen to come up here, to Dalton?"

"Happen to come up — here?" Helen was taken by surprise. She was fencing for time.

"Yes. What made us come here?"

"Why, I — I wanted to be near to make a home for you, of course, while you were at work."

"But why am I going to work?"

Helen stirred restlessly.

"Why, my dear, I've told you. I think every girl should have something whereby she could earn her bread, if it were necessary. And when this chance came, through Dr. Gleason, I thought it was just the thing for you to do."

Indifferently Betty asked two or three other questions — immaterial, irrelevant questions that led her quite away from the matter in hand. Then, as if still casually, she uttered the one question that had been the purpose of the whole talk.

"Mother, have we very much — money?"

"Why, no, dear, not so very much. But I would n't worry about the money."

The answer had come promptly and with a reassuring smile. But Betty tossed both the promptness and the reassuring smile into the limbo of disdain. Betty had her answer. She was convinced now. Her mother was poor — very poor. That was why there was to be no maid. That was why she herself was to go as secretary to this Mr. Denby the next day. Mother, poor, dear mother, was poor! As if *now* she cared whether she liked the place or not! As if she would not be glad to work her fingers off for mother!"

CHAPTER XXI

THE PLAY BEGINS

"I SHALL take you over, myself," said Helen to her daughter as they rose from the breakfast table that first day of October. "And I shall show you carefully just how to come back this afternoon; but I'm afraid I shall have to let you come back alone, dear. In the first place, I should n't know when you were ready; and in the second place, I should n't want to go and wait for you."

"Of course not!" cried Betty. "As if I'd let you — and you don't even have to go with me. I can find out by asking."

"No, I shall go with you." Betty noticed that her mother's cheeks were very pink and her eyes very bright. "Don't forget the doctor's letter; and remember, dear, just be — be your own dear sweet self."

"Why, mother, you're — *crying!*" exclaimed the dismayed Betty.

"Crying? Not a bit of it!" The head came proudly erect.

"But does it mean so much to you that I — that I — that he — likes me?" asked Betty softly.

The next moment, alarmed and amazed, she found her mother's convulsive arms about her, her mother's trembling voice in her ears.

"It'll mean all the world to me, Betty — oh, Betty, my baby!"

"Why, mother!" exclaimed the girl, aghast and shaken.

But already her mother had drawn herself up, and was laughing through her tears.

"Dear, dear, but only look at the fuss this old mother-bird is making at the first flight of her young one!" she chattered gayly. "Come, no more of this! We'll be late. We'll get ready right away. You say you have the letter from the doctor. Don't forget that."

"No, I won't. I have it all safe," tossed the girl over her shoulder, as she hurried away for her hat and coat. A minute later she came back to find her mother shrouding herself in the black veil. "Oh, mother, dear, *please!* You are n't going to wear that horrid veil to-day, are you?" she remonstrated.

"Why, yes, dear. Why not?"

"I don't like it a bit. And it's so thick! I can't see a bit of *you* through it."

"Can't you? Good!" (Vaguely Betty wondered at the almost gleeful tone of the voice.) "Then nobody can see my eyes — and know that I've been crying."

"Ho! they would n't, anyway," frowned Betty. "Your eyes are n't red at all, mother."

But the mother only laughed again gleefully — and fastened the veil with still another pin. A minute later mother and daughter left the house together.

It was not a long ride to the foot of the street that led up the hill to Burke Denby's home. With carefully minute directions as to the return home at night,

Helen left her daughter halfway up the hill, with the huge wrought-iron gates of the Denby driveway just before her.

"And now remember everything — *everything*, dear," she faltered, clinging a little convulsively to her daughter's arm. "Dear, dear, but I'm not sure I ought to let you go — after all," she choked.

"Nonsense, mumsey! Of course you ought to let me go!"

"Then you must remember to tell me everything — when you come home to-night — *everything*. I shall want to know every single little thing that's happened!"

"I will, dear, I will. And don't worry. I'm sure I'm going to do all right," comforted the girl, plainly trying to quiet the anxious fear in her mother's voice. "And what a beautiful old place it is!" she went on, her admiring eyes sweeping the handsome house and spacious grounds beyond the gates. "I shall love it there, I know. And I'm so glad the doctor got it for me. Now, don't worry!" she finished with a gay wave of her hand as she turned and sped up the hill.

The mother, with a last lingering look and a sob fortunately smothered in the enshrouding veil, turned and hurried away in the opposite direction.

Many times before Betty's return late that afternoon, Helen wondered that a day, just one little day, could be so long. It seemed to her that each minute was an hour, and each hour a day, so slowly did the clock tick the time away. She tried to work, to sew, to

read. But there seemed really nothing that she wanted to do except to stand at one of the windows, her eyes on the massive, white-pillared old house set in its wide sweep of green on the opposite hill.

What was happening over there? Was there a possible chance that Burke would question, suspect, discover — anything? How would he like — Betty? How would Betty like him? How would Betty do, anyway, in such a position? It was Betty's first experience in — in working for any one; and Betty — sweet and dear and loving as she was — had something of the Denby will and temper, as her mother had long since discovered. Betty was fearless and high-spirited. If she did not like — but what was happening over there?

And what would the outcome be? After all, perhaps, as the doctor had said, it was something of a comic opera and farce all in one — this thing she was doing. Very likely the whole thing, from the first, when she ran away years ago, had been absurd and preposterous, just as the doctor had said. And very likely Burke himself, when he found out, would think so, too. It was a fearsome thing — to take matters in her own hands as she had done, and attempt to twist the thread in Fate's hands, and wrest it away from what she feared was destruction — as if her own puny fingers could deal with Destiny!

And might it not be, after all, that she had been chasing a will-o'-the-wisp of fancied "culture" all these years? True, she no longer said "swell" and

"grand," and she knew how to eat her soup quietly; but was that going to make Burke — love her? She realized now something of what it was that she had undertaken when she fled to the doctor years ago. She realized, too, that during these intervening years there had come to her a very real sense of what love, marriage, and a happy home ought to mean — and what they must mean if she were ever to be happy with Burke, or to make him happy.

But what was taking place — over there?

At ten minutes before five Betty reached home. Her mother met her halfway down the stairs.

"Oh, Betty, you — you *are* here!" she panted. "Now, tell me everything — every single thing," she reiterated, almost dragging the girl into the apartment, in her haste and excitement. "Don't skip anything — not the least little thing; for a little thing might mean so much — to me."

"Why, mother!" exclaimed Betty, her laughing eyes growing vaguely troubled. "Do you really *care* so much?"

With a sudden tightening of the throat Helen pulled herself up sharply. She gave a light laugh.

"Care? Of course I care! Don't you suppose I want to know what my baby has been doing all the long day away from me? Now, tell me. Sit right down and tell me from the beginning."

"All right, I will," smiled Betty. To herself she said: "Poor mother! As if I would n't work my fingers off before I'd fail her, when she cares so much —

when she *needs* so much — what I earn!" Then, aloud, cheerily, she began: —

"Well, first, I walked up that long, long walk through that beautiful lawn to the house; but for a minute I did n't ring the bell. It was so beautiful — the view from that veranda, with the sun on the reds and browns and yellows of the trees everywhere! Then I remembered suddenly that I had n't come to make a call and admire the view, but that I was a business woman now. So I rang the bell. There was a lovely old brass knocker on the great door; but I saw a very conspicuous push-button, and I concluded that was for real use."

"Yes, yes. And were you — frightened, dear?"

"Well, 'nervous,' we'll call it. Then, as I was planning just what to say, the door opened and the oldest little old man I ever saw stood before me."

"Yes, go on!"

"He was the butler, I found out afterwards. They called him Benton. He seemed surprised, somehow, to see me, or frightened, or something. Anyway, he started queerly, as his eyes met mine, and he muttered a quick something under his breath; but all I could hear was the last, 'No, no, it could n't be!' "

"Yes — yes!" breathed Helen, her face a little white.

"The next minute he became so stiff and straight and dignified that even his English cousin might have envied him. I told him I was Miss Darling, and that I had a note to Mr. Denby from Dr. Gleason.

"'Yes, Miss. The master is expecting you. He said to show you right in. This way, please,' he said then, pompously. And then I saw that great hall. Oh, mother, if you could see it! It's wonderful, and so full of treasures! I could hardly take off my hat and coat properly, for devouring a superb specimen of old armor right in front of me. Then Benton took me into the library, and I saw — something even more wonderful."

"You mean your — er — Mr. Denby?" The mother's face was aglow.

Betty gave a merry laugh.

"Indeed, I don't! Oh, he was there, but he was no wonder, mother, dear. The wonder was cabinet after cabinet filled with jades and bronzes and carved ivories and Babylonian tablets and — But I could n't begin to tell you! I could n't even begin to see for myself, for, of course, I had to say something to Mr. Denby."

"Of course! And tell me — what was he — he like?"

"Oh, he was just a man, tall and stern-looking, and a little gray. He's old, you know. He is n't young at all" — spoken with all the serene confidence of Betty's eighteen years. "He has nice eyes, and I imagine *he'd* be nice, if he'd let himself be. But he won't."

"Why, Betty, what — what do you mean?"

Betty laughed and shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh, mother, dear, you'd have to see him really

to know. It's just that — that he's so used to having his own way that he takes it as a matter of course, as his right."

"Oh, my dear!"

"But he does. It shows up in everything that everybody in that house does. I could see that, even in this one day I was there. Benton, Sarah (the maid), Mrs. Gowing (the old cousin housekeeper) — even the dog and the cat show that they've stood at attention for Master Burke Denby all their lives. You just wait till I get *my* chance. I'll show him somebody that is n't standing at salute all the time."

"*Betty!*" There was real horror in the woman's voice this time.

Again Betty's merry laugh rang out.

"Don't look so shocked, dearie. I shan't do anything or say anything to imperil my — my job." (Betty's eyes twinkled even more merrily over the last word.) "It's just that I don't think any living man has a right to make everybody so afraid of him as Mr. Denby very plainly has done. And I only mean that if the occasion ever came up, I should let him know that I am not afraid of him."

"Oh, Betty, Betty, be careful, be *careful.* I beg of you, be careful!"

"Oh, I will. Don't worry," laughed the girl. "But, listen, don't you want me to go on with my story?"

"Yes — oh, yes!"

"Well, where was I? Oh, I know — just inside the library door. Very good, then. Ruthlessly suppress-

ing my almost overwhelming longing to pounce on one of those alluring cabinets, I advanced properly and held out my note to Mr. Denby. As I came near I fancied that he, too, gave a slight start as he looked sharply into my face; and I thought I caught a real gleam of life in his eyes. The next instant it was gone, however (if indeed it had ever been there!), and he had taken my note and waved me politely to a chair."

"Yes, go on, go on!"

"Yes; well, do you know? — that's exactly what I felt like saying to him," laughed Betty softly. "He just glanced at the note with a low ejaculation; then he sat there staring at nothing for so long that I began to think I should scream from sheer nervousness. Then, perhaps I stirred a little. At all events, he turned with a start, and then is when I saw, for just a minute, how kind his eyes could be.

" 'There, there, my child, I beg your pardon,' he cried. 'I quite forgot you were here. Something — your eyes, I think — set me to dreaming. Now to business! Perhaps you'll be good enough to take some letters for me. You'll find pencils, pen, and paper there at your right.' And I did. And I began. And that's all."

"All! But surely there was more!"

"Not much. I took dictation in long hand for perhaps a dozen letters — most of them short ones. He said he was behind on his personal correspondence. Then he went away and left me. He goes down to his office at the Denby Iron Works every forenoon,

"SO I RANG THE BELL"

I understand. Anyway, there I was, left in that fascinating room with all those cabinets full of treasures that I so longed to explore, but tied to a lot of scrawly notes and a typewriter. I forgot to say there was one of those disappearing typewriters in a desk over by the window. It was n't quite like Gladys's, but the keyboard was, and I very soon got the run of it.

"At one o'clock he came back. I had the letters all done, and they looked lovely. I was rather proud of them. I passed them over for him to sign, and waited expectantly for a nice little word of commendation — which I did n't get."

"Oh, but I'm sure he did n't — did n't realize that — that —"

"Oh, no, he did n't realize, of course, that this was my maiden effort at private secretarying," laughed Betty, a little ruefully, "and that I wanted to be patted on the head with a 'Well done, little girl!' He just shoved them back for me to fold and put in the envelopes; and just then Benton came to announce luncheon."

"But tell me about the luncheon."

"There is n't much to tell. There were just us three at the table, Mr. Denby, Mrs. Gowing, and myself. There was plenty to eat, and it was very nice. But, dear, dear, the dreariness of it! With the soup Mrs. Gowing observed that it was a nice day. With the chicken patties she asked if I liked Dalton; and with the salad she remarked that we had had an unusually cold summer. Dessert was eaten in utter

silence. Why, mother, I should die if I had to spend my life in an atmosphere like that!"

"But did n't Mr. Denby say — anything?"

"Oh, yes. He asked me for the salt, and he gave an order to Benton. Oh, he's such fascinating company — he is!"

At the disturbed expression on her mother's face, Betty gave a playful shrug. "Oh, I know, he's my respected employer, and all that," she laughed; "and I shall be very careful to do his bidding. Never fear! But that does n't mean that I've got to love him."

Helen Denby flushed a painful red.

"But I wanted — I hoped you would — er — l-like him, my dear," she faltered.

"Maybe I shall — when I get him — er — trained," retorted Betty, flashing a merry glance into her mother's dismayed eyes. "Don't worry, dear. I was a perfect angel to him to-day. Truly I was. Listen! After luncheon Mr. Denby brought me three or four newspapers which he had marked here and there; and for an hour then I read to him. And what do you think? — when I had finished he said, in that crisp short way of his: 'You have a good voice, Miss Darling. I hope you won't mind if I ask you to read to me often.' And of course I smiled and said no, indeed, I should be glad to read as often as he liked."

"Of course!" beamed the mother, with so decided an emphasis that Betty exclaimed warningly: —

"Tut, tut, now! Don't *you* go to tumbling down and worshiping him like all the rest."

"W-worshiping him!" Helen Denby's cheeks were scarlet.

"Yes," nodded Betty, with tranquil superiority. "It is n't good for him, I tell you. He does n't get anything but worship from every single one of those people around him. Honestly, if he should declare that the earth was flat, I think that ridiculous old butler and that scared cousin housekeeper would bow: 'Just as you say, sir, just as you say.' Humph! He'd better tell *me* the world is flat, some day."

"Oh, Betty! Betty!" implored Betty's mother.

But Betty only went on with a merry toss of her head: —

"Well, after the reading there were other letters, then some work on a card-index record of his correspondence. After that I came home. But, mother, oh, mother, only think what it'll be when we begin to catalogue all those treasures in his cabinets. And we're going to do it. He said we were. It seems as if I just could n't wait!"

"But you will be careful what you say to him, dear," begged the mother again, anxiously. "He would n't understand your mischief, dear, and I — I'm sure he would n't like it."

Betty stooped to give a playful kiss.

"Careful? Why, mumsey, dear, when we get at those cabinets he may tell me a dozen times the earth is flat, if he wants to, and I won't so much as blink — if I think there's any danger of my getting cheated out of that cataloguing!"

CHAPTER XXII

ACTOR AND AUDIENCE

HELEN did not go with her daughter to Denby House the second morning. Betty insisted that she was quite capable of taking the short trip by herself and Helen seemed nothing loath to remain at home. Helen never seemed, indeed, loath to remain at home these days — especially during daylight. In the evening, frequently, she went out for a little walk with Betty. Then was when she did her simple marketing. Then, too, was the only time she would go out without the heavy black veil. Betty, being away all day, and at home only after five o'clock, did not notice all these points at first. As time passed, however, she did wonder why her mother never would go out on Sunday. Still, Betty was too thoroughly absorbed in her own new experiences to pay much attention to anything else. Every morning at nine o'clock she left the house, eager for the day's work; and every afternoon, soon after five, she was back in the tiny home, answering her mother's hurried questions as to what had happened through the day.

"And you're so lovely and interested in every little thing!" she exclaimed to her mother one day.

"But I *am* interested, my dear, in every little thing," came the quick answer. And Betty, looking at her mother's flushed face and trembling lips felt

suddenly again the tightening at her throat — that her success or failure should mean so much to mother — dear mother who was trying so hard not to show how poor they were!

For perhaps a week Betty reported little change in the daily routine of her work. She wrote letters, read from books, magazines, or newspapers, worked on the card-index record of correspondence, and sorted papers, pamphlets, and circulars that had apparently been accumulating for weeks.

"But I'm getting along beautifully," she declared one day. "I've got Mrs. Gowing thawed so she actually says as many as three sentences to a course now. And you should see the beaming smile Benton gives me every morning!"

"And — Mr. Denby?" questioned her mother, with poorly concealed eagerness.

Betty lifted her brows and tossed her young head.

"Well, he's improving," she flashed mischievously. "He asked for the salt *and* the pepper, yesterday. And to-day he actually observed that he thought it looked like snow — at the table, I mean. Of course he speaks to me about my work through the day; but he does n't say any more than is necessary. Truly, mother, dear, I'd never leave my happy home for *him*."

"Oh, Betty, how can you say — such dreadful things!"

Betty laughed again mischievously.

"Don't worry, mumsey. He'll never ask me to do

it! But, honestly, mother, I can't see any use in a man's being so stern and glum all the time."

"Does he really act so unhappy, then?"

At an unmistakable something in her mother's voice Betty looked up in surprise.

"Why, mother, that sounded exactly as if you were *glad* he was unhappy!" she exclaimed.

Helen, secretly dismayed and terrified, boldly flaunted the flag of courage.

"Did I? Oh, no," she laughed easily. "Still, I'm not so sure but I am a little glad: if he's unhappy, all the more chance for you to make yourself indispensable by helping him and making him happy. See?"

"Happy!" scoffed Betty with superb disdain; "why, the man does n't know what the word means."

"But perhaps he has seen — a great deal of trouble, dear." The mother's eyes were gravely tender.

"Perhaps he has. But is that any reason for inflicting it on other people by reflection?" demanded Betty, with all of youth's intolerance for age and its incomprehensible attitudes. "Does it do any possible good, either to himself or to anybody else, to retire behind a frown and a grunt, and look out upon all those beautiful things around him through eyes that are like a piece of cold steel? Of course it does n't!"

"Oh, Betty, how can you!" protested the dismayed mother again.

But Betty, with a laugh and a spasmodic hug that ended in a playful little shake, retorted with all her old gay sauciness: —

"Don't you worry, mumsey. I'm a perfect angel to that man." Then, wickedly, she added as she whisked off: "You see, I have n't yet had a chance to poke even one finger inside of one of those cabinets!"

It was three days later that Betty, having put on her hat and coat at Denby House, had occasion to go back into the library to speak to her employer.

"Mr. Denby, shall I —" she began; then fell back in amazement. The man before her had leaped to his feet and started toward her, his face white like paper.

"Good God! — *you!*" he exclaimed. The next instant he stopped short, the blood rushing back to his face. "Oh, *Miss Darling!* I — er — I thought, for a moment, you were — *What a fool!*" With the last low muttered words he turned and sat down heavily.

Betty, to whom the whole amazing sentence was distinctly audible, lifted demure eyes to his face.

"I beg your pardon, you said —" The sentence came to a suggestive pause. Into Betty's demure eyes flashed an unmistakable twinkle.

The man stared, frowned, then flushed a deeper red as full comprehension came. He gave a grim laugh.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Darling. That epithet was meant for me — not you." He hesitated, his eyes still searching her face. "Strange — strange!" he muttered then; "but I wonder what made you suddenly look so much like — Take off your hat, please," he directed abruptly. "There!" he exclaimed triumphantly, as Betty pulled out the pins and lifted the hat from her head, "that explains it —

your hat! Before, when I first saw you, your eyes reminded me of — of some one, and with your hat on the likeness is much more striking. For a moment I was actually fool enough to think — and I forgot she must be twice your age now, too," he finished under his breath.

Betty waited a silent minute at the door; then, apparently still unnoticed, she turned and left the room, pinning her hat on again in the hall.

To her mother that afternoon she carried a jubilant countenance. "Well, mother, he's alive! I've found out that much," she announced merrily.

"He? Who?"

"Mr. Burke Denby, to be sure."

"Alive! Why, Betty, what do you mean?"

"He's alive — like folks," twinkled Betty. "He's got memory, a heart, and I *think* a sense of humor. I'm sure he did laugh a little over calling me a fool."

"A fool! Child, what have you done now?" moaned Betty's mother.

"Nothing, dear, nothing — but put on my hat," chuckled Betty irrepressibly. "Listen, and I'll tell you." And she drew a vivid picture of the scene in the library. "There, what did I tell you?" she demanded in conclusion. "Did I do anything but put on my hat?"

"Oh, but Betty, you must n't, you can't — that is, you must — I mean, *please* be careful!" On Helen's face joy and terror were fighting a battle royal.

"Careful? Of course I'm careful," cried Betty.

"Did n't I stand as still as a mouse while he was sitting there with his beetling brows bent in solemn thought? And then did n't I turn without a word and pussy-step out of the room when I saw that he had ceased to realize that there was such a being in the world as little I? Indeed, I did! And not till I got out of doors did I remember that I had gone into that library in the first place to ask a question. But I did n't go back. The question would keep — and that was more than I could promise of his temper, if I disturbed him then. So I came home. But I just can't wait now to get back. Only think how much more interesting things are going to be now!"

"Why, y-yes, I suppose so," breathed Helen, a little doubtfully.

"Oh, yes, I shall be watching always for him to come alive again. Besides, it's so romantic! It's a love-story, of course."

"Why, Betty, what an idea!" The mother's face flamed instantly scarlet.

"Why, of course it is, mother. If you could have seen his face you'd have known that no one but somebody he cared very much for could have brought *that* look to it. You see, he thought for a moment that I was she. Then he said, 'What a fool!' and sat down. Next he just looked at me; and, mother, in his eyes there were just years and years of sorrow all rolled into that one minute."

"Were there — really?" The mother's face was turned quite away now.

"Yes. And don't you see? I'm not going to mind now ever what he says and does, nor how glum he is; for I *know* down inside, he's got a heart. And only think, *I look like her!*" finished Betty, suddenly springing to her feet, and whirling about in ecstasy. "Oh, it's so exciting, is n't it?"

But her mother did not answer. She did not seem to have heard, perhaps because her back was turned. She had crossed the room to the window. Betty, following her, put a loving arm about her shoulders.

"Oh, and, mother, look!" she exclaimed eagerly. "I was going to tell you. I discovered it last Sunday. You can see the Denby House from here. Did you know it? It's so near dark now, it is n't very clear, but there's a light in the library windows, and others upstairs, too. See? Right through there at the left of that dark clump of trees, set in the middle of that open space. That's the lawn, and you can just make out the tall white pillars of the veranda. See?"

"Oh, yes, I see. Yes, so you can, can't you?"

Helen's voice was light and cheery, and carefully impersonal, carrying no hint of her inward tumult, for which she was devoutly thankful.

In spite of her high expectations, Betty came from Denby House the next afternoon with pouting lips.

"He's just exactly the same as ever, only more so, if anything," she complained to her mother. "He dictated his letters, then for an hour, I think, he just sat at his desk doing nothing, with his hand shielding his eyes. Twice, though, I caught him looking at

me. But his eyes were n't kind and — and human, as they were yesterday. They were their usual little bits of cold steel. He went off then to his office at the Works (he said he was going there), and he never came home even to luncheon. I did n't have half work enough to do, and — and the cabinets were locked. I tried them. At four he came in, signed the letters, said good-afternoon and stalked upstairs. And that's the last I saw of him."

Nightly, after this, for a time, Betty gave forth what she called the "latest bulletin concerning the patient": —

"No change."

"Sat up and took notice."

"Slight rise in temper."

"Dull and listless."

Such were her reports. Then came the day when she impressively announced that the patient showed really marked improvement. He asked her to pass not only the salt and the pepper, but the olives.

"And, indeed, when you come to think of it," she went on with mock gravity, "there's mighty little else he can ask me to pass, in the way of making voluntary conversation; for Benton and Sarah do everything almost, except lift the individual mouthfuls for our consumption."

"Oh, Betty, Betty!" protested her mother.

"Yes, yes, I know — that was dreadful, was n't it, dearie?" laughed Betty contritely. "But you see I have to be so still and proper up there that

home becomes a regular safety-valve; and you know safety-valves are necessary — absolutely necessary."

Helen, gazing with fond, meditative eyes at the girl's bright face, drew a tremulous sigh.

"Yes, I know, dear; but, you see, I'm so — afraid."

"You should n't be — not with a safety-valve," retorted Betty. "But, really," she added, turning back laughingly, "there *is* one funny thing: he never stays around now when there's any chance of his seeing me with my hat on again. I've noticed it. Every single night since that time he did see me a week ago, he's bade me his stiff good-afternoon and gone upstairs *before* I'm ready to leave."

"Betty, really?" cried Helen so eagerly that Betty wheeled and faced her with a mischievous laugh.

"Who's interested *now* in Mr. Burke Denby's love-story?" she challenged. But her mother, her hands to her ears, had fled.

It was the very next afternoon that Betty came home so wildly excited that not for a full five minutes could her startled mother obtain anything like a lucid story of the day. Then it came.

"Yes, yes, I know, dear, of course you can't make anything out of what I say. But listen. I'll begin at the beginning. It was like this: This morning he had only a few letters for me. Then, in that tired voice he uses most of the time, he said: 'I think perhaps now, we might as well begin on the cataloguing. Everything else is pretty well caught up.' I jumped up and down and clapped my hands, and —"

"You did *what?*" demanded her mother aghast.

Betty's nose wrinkled in a saucy little grimace.

"Oh, I mean *inside of me. Outside* I just said, 'Yes, sir,' or 'Very well, Mr. Denby,' or something prim and proper like that.

"Well, then he showed me huge drawers full of notes and clippings in a perfectly hopeless mass of confusion, and he unlocked one of the cabinets and took out the dearest little squat Buddha with diamond eyes, and showed me a number on the base. 'There, Miss Darling,' he began again in that tired voice of his, 'some of these notes and clippings are numbered in pencil to correspond with numbers like these on the curios; but many of them are not numbered at all. Unfortunately, many of the curios, too, lack numbers. All you can do, of course, is to sort out the papers by number, separating into a single pile all those that bear no number. I shall have to help you about those. You won't, of course, know where they go. I may have trouble myself to identify some of them. Later, after the preliminary work is done, each object will be entered on a card, together with a condensed tabulation of when and where I obtained it, its age, history — anything, in short, that we can find pertaining to it. The thing to do first, however, is to go through these drawers and sort out their contents by number."

"Having said this (still in that weary voice of his), he put back the little Buddha, — which my fingers were just tingling to get hold of, — waved his hand

toward the drawers and papers, and marched out of the room. Then I set to work."

"But what did you do? How did you do it? What were those papers?"

"They were everything, mumsey: clippings from magazines and papers and sales catalogues of antiques, typewritten notes, and scrawls in long hand telling when and where and how Mr. Burke Denby or his father had found this or that thing. But what a mess they were in! And such a lot of them without the sign of a number!

"First, of course, I took a drawer and sorted the numbers into little piles on the big flat library table. Some of them had ten or a dozen, all one number. That work was very easy — only I did so want to read every last one of those notes and clippings! But of course I could n't stop for that then. But I did read some of the unnumbered ones, and pretty quick I found one that I just knew referred to the little diamond-eyed Buddha Mr. Denby had taken out of the cabinet. I could n't resist then. I just had to go and get it and find out. And I did — and it was; so I put them together on the library table.

"Then I noticed in the same cabinet a little old worn toby jug — a shepherd plaid — about the oldest and rarest there is, you know; and I knew I had three or four unnumbered notes on toby jugs — and, sure enough! three of them fitted this toby; and I put *them* together, with the jug on top, on the library table. Of course I was wild then to find some more.

In the other cabinets that were n't unlocked, I could see, through the glass doors, a lot more things, and some of them, I was sure, fitted some of my unnumbered notes; but of course they did n't do me any good, as I could n't get at them. One perfectly beautiful Oriental lacquered cabinet with diamond-paned doors was full of tablets, big and little, and I was crazy to get at those—I had a lot of notes about tablets. I did find in my cabinet, though, a little package of Chinese bank-notes, and I was sure I had something on those. And I had. I knew about them, anyway. I had seen some in London. These dated 'way back to the Tang dynasty — sixth century, you know — and were just as smooth! They 're made of a kind of paper that crumples up like silk, but does n't show creases. They had little rings printed on them of different sizes for different values, so that even the ignorant people could n't be deceived, and —"

"Yes, yes, dear, but go on — go on," interrupted the eager-eyed mother, with a smile. "I want to know what happened *here* — not back in the sixth century!"

"Yes, yes, I know," breathed Betty; "but they were *so* interesting — those things were! Well, of course I put the bank-notes with their clippings on the table; then I began on another drawer. It got to be one o'clock very soon, and Mr. Denby came home to luncheon. I wish you could have seen his face when he entered the library and saw what I had done. His whole countenance lighted up. Why, he looked

actually handsome! — and he's forty, if he's a day! And there was n't a shred of tiredness in his voice.

"Then when he found the bank-notes and the Buddha and the toby jug with the unnumbered clippings belonging to them, he got almost as excited as I was. And when he saw how interested I was, he unlocked the other cabinets — and how we did talk, both at once! Anyhow, whenever I stopped to get my breath he was always talking; and I never could wait for him to finish, there was so much I wanted to ask.

"Poor old Benton! I don't know how many times he announced luncheon before it dawned over us that he was there at all; and he looked positively apoplectic when we did turn and see him. I don't dare to think how long we kept luncheon waiting. But everything had that flat, kept-hot-too-long taste, and Benton and Sarah served it with the air of injured saints. Mrs. Gowing showed meek disapproval, and did n't make even one remark to a course — but perhaps, after all, that was because she did n't have a chance. You see, Mr. Denby and I talked all the time ourselves."

"But I thought he — he never talked."

"He has n't — before. But you see to-day he had such a lot to tell me about the things — how he came by them, and all that. And every single one of them has got a story. And he has such wonderful things! After luncheon he showed them to me — some of them: such marvelous bronzes and carved ivories

and Babylonian tablets. He's got one with a real thumb-print on it — think of it, a thumb-print five thousand years old! And he's got a wonderful Buddha two thousand years old from a Chinese temple, and he knows the officer who got it — during the Boxer Rebellion, you know. And he's got another, not so old, of Himalayan Indian wood, exquisitely carved, and half covered with jewels.

"Why, mother, he's traveled all over the world, and everywhere he's found something wonderful or beautiful to bring home. I could n't begin to tell you, if I talked all night. And he seemed so pleased because I was interested, and because I could appreciate to some extent, their value."

"I can — imagine it!" There was a little catch in Helen Denby's voice, but Betty did not notice it.

"Yes, and that makes me think," she went on blithely. "He said such a funny thing once. It was when I held in my hand the Babylonian tablet with the thumb-mark. I had just been saying how I wished the little tablet had the power to transport the holder of it back to a vision of the man who had made that thumb-print, when he looked at me so queerly, and muttered: 'Humph! they *are* more than potatoes to you, are n't they?' Potatoes, indeed! What do you suppose made him say that? Oh, and that is when he asked me, too, how I came to know so much about jades and ivories and Egyptian antiques."

"What did you tell him?"

At the startled half terror in her mother's voice Betty's eyes widened.

"Why, that I learned in London, of course, with you and Gladys and Miss Hughes, poking around old shops there — and everywhere else that we could find them, wherever we were. *You* know how we used to go 'digging,' as Gladys called it."

"Yes, I know," subsided the mother, a little faintly.

"Well, we worked all the afternoon — *together!* — Mr. Denby and I did. What do you think of that?" resumed Betty, after a moment's pause. "And not once since this morning have I heard any tiredness in Mr. Burke Denby's voice, if you please."

"But how — how long is this going to take you?"

"Oh, ages and ages! It can't help it. Why, mother, there are such a lot of them, and such a whole lot about some of them. Others, that he does n't know so much about, we're going to look up. He has lots of books on such things, and he's buying more all the time. Then all this stuff has got to be condensed and tabulated and put on cards and filed away. But I love it — every bit of it; and I'm so excited to think I've really begun it. And he's every whit as excited as I am, mother. Listen! He actually forgot all about running away to-night before I put on my hat. And I never thought of it till just as I was pinning it on. He had followed me out into the hall to tell me something about the old armor in the corner; then, all of a sudden, he stopped — *off* — *short*, just like that, and said, ' Good-night, Miss Darling,'

in his old stiff way. As he turned and went upstairs I caught sight of his face. I knew then. It was the hat. I had reminded him again of — *her*. But I shan't mind, now, if he is stern and glum sometimes — not with a Babylonian tablet or a Chinese Buddha for company. Oh, mother, if you could see those wonderful things. But maybe sometime you will. I should n't wonder."

"Maybe sometime — I — will!" faltered the mother, growing a little white. "Why, Betty, what do you mean?"

"Why, I mean, maybe I can take you sometime — I'll ask Mr. Denby by and by, after we get things straightened out, if he won't let me bring you some day to see them."

"Oh, no, no, Betty, don't — *please* don't! I — I could n't think of such a thing!"

Betty laughed merrily.

"Why, mumsey, you need n't look so frightened. They won't bite you. There are n't any of those things *alive*, dear!"

"No, of course not. But I'm — I'm sure I — I would n't be able to appreciate them at all."

"But in London you were *trying* to learn to be interested in such things," persisted Betty, still earnestly. "Don't you know? You said you *wanted* to learn to like them, and to appreciate them."

"Yes, I know. But I'm sure I would n't like to — to trouble Mr. Denby — here," stammered the mother, her face still very white.

CHAPTER XXIII

"THE PLOT THICKENS"

It was shortly before Christmas that Frank Gleason ran up to Dalton. He went first to see Burke Denby.

Burke greeted him with hearty cordiality.

"Hullo, Gleason! Good — you're just in time for dinner. But where's your bag? You aren't going back to-night!"

"No, but I am to-morrow morning, very early, so I left my grip at the hotel. Yes, yes, I know — you'd have had me here, and routed the whole house up at midnight," he went on laughingly, shaking his head at Burke's prompt remonstrations, "if I but said the word. But I'm not going to trouble you this time. I'll be delighted to stay to dinner, however, — if I get an invitation," he smiled.

"An invitation! As if you needed an invitation for — anything, in this house," scoffed Denby. "All mine is thine, as you know very well."

"Thanks. I've half a mind to put you to the test — say with that pet thumb-marked tablet of yours," retorted the doctor, with a lift of his eyebrows. "However, we'll let it go at a dinner this time. — You're looking better, old man," he said some time later, as they sat at the table, his eyes critically bent on the other's face.

"I am better."

"Glad to hear it. How's business?"

"Very good — that is, it *was* good. I haven't been near the Works for a week."

"So? Not — sick?"

"Oh, no; busy." There was the briefest of pauses; then, with disconcerting abruptness, came the question: "Where'd you get that girl, Gleason?"

"G-girl?" The doctor wanted a minute to think. Incidentally he was trying to swallow his heart — he thought it must be his heart — that big lump in his throat.

"Miss Darling."

"Miss Darling! Oh!" The doctor waved his hand inconsequently. He still wanted time. He was still swallowing at that lump. 'Why, she — she — I told you. She's the daughter of an old friend. Why, isn't she all right?" He feigned the deepest concern.

"*All right!*"

Voice and manner carried a message of satisfaction that was unmistakable. But the doctor chose to ignore it. The doctor felt himself now on sure ground. He summoned a still deeper concern to his countenance.

"Why, Denby, you don't mean she *isn't* all right? What's the trouble? Isn't she capable? — or don't you like her ways?"

"But I mean she *is* all right, man," retorted the other impatiently. "Why, Gleason, she's a wonder!"

Gleason, within whom the Hallelujah Chorus had become such a shout of triumph that he half expected

to see Burke Denby cover his ears, managed to utter a cool —

"Really? Well, I'm glad, I'm sure."

"Well, she is. She's no ordinary girl." ("If Helen could but hear that!" exulted the doctor to himself.) "Why, what do you think? She can actually tell *me* some things about my own curios!"

"Then they are more than — er — potatoes to her? You know you said —"

"Yes, I know I did. But just hear this. In spite of her seeming intelligence and capability, I'd been dreading to open those cabinets and let her touch those things dad and I had spent so many dear years together gathering. But, of course, I knew that that was silly. One of my chief reasons for getting her was the cataloguing; and it was absurd not to set her at it. So one day, after everything else was done, I explained what I wanted, and told her to go ahead."

"Well, and — did she?" prompted the doctor, as the other paused.

"She did — *exactly* that. She went ahead — 'way ahead of what I'd told her to do. Why, when I got home, I was amazed to see what she'd done. But best of all was her interest and her enthusiasm, and the fact that she knew and appreciated what they were. You see that's one of the things I'd been dreading — her ignorance — her indifference; but I dreaded more that she might gush and say, 'Oh, how pretty!' And I knew if she did I'd — I'd want to knock her down."

"So glad — she did n't!" murmured the doctor.

His host laughed shamefacedly.

"Oh, yes, I know. That was rather a strong statement. But you see I felt strongly. And then to find — But, Gleason, she really is a wonder. We're working together now — *I'm* working. As I said, I have n't been to the office for a week."

"Is she agreeable — personally?"

"Yes, very. She 's pleasant and cheerful, bright, and very much of a lady. She's capable, and has uncommon good sense. Her voice, too, is excellent for reading. In short, she is, as I told you, a wonder; and I'm more than indebted to you for finding her. Let's see, you say you do know her family?"

Gleason got suddenly to his feet.

"Yes, oh, yes. Good family, too! Now I'm sorry to eat and run, as the children say, but I'll have to, Burke, to-night. One or two other little matters I'll have to attend to before I sleep. But, as I said a few minutes ago, I'm glad to see you in better spirits. Keep on with the good work."

The doctor seemed nervous, and anxious to get away; and in another minute the great outer door had closed behind him.

"Hm-m! Wonder what's his rush," puzzled Burke Denby, left standing in the hall.

There was a slight frown on his face. But in another minute it was gone: he had remembered suddenly that he had promised Miss Darling that he would try to find certain obscure data regarding the

tablet they had been at work upon that afternoon. It was just as well, perhaps, after all, that the doctor had had to leave early — it would give more time for work.

With an eager lifting of his head Burke Denby turned and strode into the library.

Meanwhile, hurrying away from Denby House was the doctor, his whole self a Hallelujah Chorus of rejoicing. His countenance was still aglow with joy when, a little later, he rang the bell of a West Hill apartment-house suite bearing the name, "Mrs. Helen Darling."

To his joy he found Helen alone; but hardly had he given her a hasty account of his visit to Burke Denby, and assured her that he was positive everything was working out finely, when Betty came in from the corner grocery store, breezy and smiling.

"Oh, it's Dr. Gleason!" she welcomed him. "Now, I'm glad mother did n't go with me to-night, after all, — for we'd both been out then, and we should n't have seen you."

"Which would have been my great loss," bowed the man gallantly, his approving eyes on Betty's glowing face.

"Oh, but ours, too, — especially mine," she declared. "You see, I've been wishing you'd come. I wanted to thank you."

"To thank me?"

"Yes; for finding this lovely place for me."

"You like it, then?"

"I love it. Why, Dr. Gleason, you have no idea of the wonderful things that man — But you said you knew him," she broke off suddenly. "Don't you know him?"

"Oh, yes, very well."

"Then you've been there, of course."

"Many times."

"Oh, how silly of me!" she laughed. "As if I could tell *you* anything about antiques and curios! But has n't he some beautiful things?"

"He has, indeed. But how about the man? You have n't told me at all how you like Mr. Denby himself."

Betty glanced at her mother with a roguish shrug.

"Well, as I tell mother, now that I've got him trained, he does very well."

"My *dear!*" murmured her mother.

"Trained?" The question was the doctor's.

"Yes. You see at first he was such a bear."

"Oh, Betty!" exclaimed her mother, in very genuine distress.

But Betty plainly was in one of her most mischievous moods. With another merry glance at her mother she turned to the doctor.

"It's only this, doctor. You see, at first he was so silent and solemn, and Benton and Sarah and Mrs. Gowing were so scared, and the whole house was so scared and silent and solemn, that it seemed some days as if I should scream, just to make a little excitement. But it's all very different now. Benton and

Sarah are all smiles, Mrs. Gowing actually laughs sometimes, and the only trouble is there is n't time enough for Mr. Denby to get in all the talking he wants to."

"Then Mr. Denby seems happier?"

"Oh, very much. Of course, at first it was just about the work — we're cataloguing the curios; but lately it's been in other ways. Why, the other day he found I could play and sing a little, and to-day he asked me to sing for him. And I did."

Helen sat suddenly erect in her chair.

"Sing? You sang for Mr. Denby?" she cried, plainly very much agitated. "But you had n't told me — that!"

"I had n't done it till this afternoon, just before I came home," laughed Betty.

"But what did you sing? Oh, you — you did n't sing any of those foolish, nonsensical songs, did you?" implored Helen, half rising from her chair.

"But I did," bridled Betty. Then, as her mother fell back dismayed, she cried: "Did you suppose I'd risk singing solemn things to a man who had just learned to laugh?"

"But, *ragtime!*" moaned Helen, "when he's always hated it so!"

"'Always hated it so'!" echoed Betty, with puzzled eyes. "Why, I had n't played it before, dearie. I had n't played anything!"

"No, no, I — I mean always hated everything gay and lively *like* ragtime," corrected Helen, her

cheeks abnormally pink, as she carefully avoided the doctor's eyes. "Why did n't you play some of your good music, dear?"

"Oh, I did, afterwards, of course, — MacDowell and Schubert, and that lullaby we love. But he liked the ragtime, too, all right. I know he did. Besides, it just did me good to liven up the old house a bit. I know Benton was listening in the hall, and I'm positive Sarah and the cook had the dining-room door open. As for Mrs. Gowing, she — dear old soul — just sat and frankly cried. And the merrier I sang, the faster the tears rolled down her face — but it was for joy. I could see that. And once I heard her mutter: 'To think that ever again I should hear music and laughter — *here!*' Dr. Gleason, did Mr. Denby ever love somebody once, and do I look like her?"

Taken utterly by surprise, the doctor, for one awful minute, floundered in appalled confusion. It was Helen this time who came to the rescue.

"I shall tell the doctor he need n't answer that question, Betty," she said, with just a shade of reproval in her voice. "If he did know of such a thing, do you think he ought to tell you, or anybody else?"

Betty laughed and colored a little.

"No, dear, of course not. And I should n't have asked it, should I?"

"But what makes you think he has?" queried the doctor, with very much the air of a small boy who is longing yet fearing to investigate the reason for the non-explosion of a firecracker.

"Because he said twice that I reminded him of some one, particularly with my hat on; and both times, afterward, he looked *so* romantic and solemn" — Betty's eyes began to twinkle — "that I thought maybe I was on the track of a real, live love-story, you see. But he has n't said anything about it lately; so perhaps I was mistaken, after all. You see, really, he's quite like folks, now, since we've been working on the curios."

"And how are you getting along with those?"

"Very well, only it's slow, of course. There is such a mass of material, and so much to look up and study up besides. We're just getting it together and tabulating it now on temporary sheets. We shan't begin the real cataloguing on the final cards until we have all our material in hand, Mr. Denby says."

"But you are n't getting tired of it?"

"Not a bit! I love it — even the digging after dates. I'm sure *you* can understand that," she smiled.

"Yes, I can understand that," he smiled back at her. And now, for the first time for long minutes, he dared to look across the room into Helen Denby's eyes.

CHAPTER XXIV

COUNTER-PLOTS

In thinking it over afterwards Burke Denby tried to place the specific thing that put into his mind that most astounding suggestion. He knew very well the precise moment of the inception of the idea — it had been on Christmas night as he sat before the fire in his gloomy library. But what had led to it? Of just what particular episode concerning his acquaintance with this girl had he been thinking when, like a blinding flash out of the dark, had leaped forth those startling words?

He had been particularly lonely that evening, perhaps because it was Christmas, and he could not help comparing his own silent fireside with the gay, laughter-filled, holly-trimmed homes all about him. Being Christmas, he had not had even the divertisement of his secretary's presence — companionship. Yes, it was companionship, he decided. It could not but be that when she brought so much love and enthusiasm to the work, as well as the truly remarkable skill and knowledge she displayed. And she was, too, such a charming girl, so bright and lovable. The house had not been the same since she came into it. He hoped he might keep her. He should not like to let her go — now. But if only she could be there all the time! It would be much easier for *her* —

winter storms were coming on now; and as for him — he should like it very much. The evenings were interminably long sometimes. He wondered if, after all, it might not be arranged. There was a mother, he believed. They lived in an apartment on West Hill. But she could doubtless be left all right, or she might even come, too, if it were necessary. Surely the house was large enough, and she might be good company for his cousin. And it would be nice for the daughter. It might, indeed, be a very suitable arrangement all around.

Of course, if he had a wife and daughter of his own, he would not have to be filling his house with strangers like this. If Helen had not — Curious, too, how the girl was always making him think of Helen — her eyes, especially when she had on her hat, and little ways she had —

It came then, with an electric force that brought him to his feet with almost a cry: —

"What if she were — maybe she *is* — your daughter!"

As he paced the room feverishly, Burke Denby tried to bring the chaos of thoughts into something like order.

It was absurd, of course. It could not be. And yet — there were her eyes so like Helen's, and the way she had of pushing back her hair, and of lifting her chin when she was determined about something. There were, too, actually some little things in her that reminded him of — himself. And surely her remark-

able love and aptitude for the work she was doing for him now ought to mean — something.

But could it be? Was it *possible?* Would Helen do such a fantastic thing — send him his own daughter like this? And the doctor — this girl had been introduced by him. Then he, too, must be in the plot. "A daughter of an old friend." Yes, that might be. But would Gleason lend himself to such a wild scheme? It seemed too absurd to be possible. And yet —

His mind still played with the idea.

Just what did he know about this young woman? Very little. What if, after all, it were Dorothy Elizabeth? And it might be, for all he *knew* to the *contrary.* She was about the right age, he should judge — his little girl would be eighteen — by now. Her name was Elizabeth; she had told him that, at the same time saying that she was always called "Betty." There was a mother — but he had never heard the girl mention her father. And they had dropped, as it were, right out of a clear sky into Dalton, and into his life. Could it be? Of course it really was too absurd; but yet —

With a sudden setting of his jaws the man determined to put his secretary through a course of questions, the answers to which would forever remove all doubt, one way or another. If at the onset of the questioning she grew suddenly evasive and confused, he would have his answer at once: she was his daughter, and was attempting to keep the knowledge from him until such time as her mother should wish to let

the secret out. On the other hand, even if she were not confused or evasive as to her answers, she still might be his daughter — and not know of the relationship. In which case his questions, of course, must be carried to the point where he himself would be satisfied. Meanwhile he would think no more about it; and, above all, he would keep his thoughts from dwelling on what it would be if — she were.

Having reached this wise decision, Burke Denby tossed his half-smoked cigar into the fire and attempted to toss as lightly the whole subject from his mind — an attempt which met with sorry success.

Burke Denby plumed himself that he was doing his questioning most diplomatically when, the next morning, he began to carry out his plans. With almost superhuman patience he had waited until the morning letters were out of the way, and until he and his secretary were working together over sorting the papers in a hitherto unopened drawer.

"Did you have a pleasant Christmas, Miss Darling?" Careless as was his apparent aim, it was the first gun of his campaign.

"Yes, thank you, very pleasant."

"I did n't. Too quiet. A house needs young people at Christmas. If only I had a daughter now —" He watched her face closely, but he could detect no change of color. There was only polite, sympathetic interest. "Let me see, you live with your mother, I believe," he finished somewhat abruptly.

"Yes."

"Have you lived in Dalton long?"

"Only since October, when I came to you."

"Do you like it here?"

"Oh, yes, very well."

"Still, not so well as where you came from, perhaps," he smiled pleasantly.

Betty laughed.

"But I came — from so many places."

"That so?"

"Paris, Berlin, London, Genoa, — mostly London, of late."

"But you are American born!"

"Oh, yes."

"I thought so. Still, it is a little singular, having been gone so long, that you are so American in your speech and manner. You are n't a bit English, Miss Darling."

Betty laughed again merrily.

"How mother would love to hear you say that!" she cried. "You see, mother was so afraid I would be — English, or something foreign — educated as I was almost entirely across the water. But we were with Americans all the time, and our teachers, except for languages, were Americans, whenever possible."

"Hm-m; I see. And now you are here in America again. And does your mother like it — here?"

"Why, I think so."

"And does she like Dalton, too? Perhaps she has been here before, though." The casual way in which

the question was put gave no indication of the way the questioner was holding his breath for the answer.

"Oh, yes. She was here several years ago, she says."

"Indeed!" To Burke Denby it was as if something within him had suddenly snapped. He relaxed in his chair. His eyes were still covertly searching Betty's serene face bent over her work. Within himself he was saying: "Well, *she* does n't know, whatever it is." Aloud he resumed: "And were you, too, ever here?"

"Why, yes; but I don't remember it. I was only a year or two old, mother said."

The man almost leaped from his chair. Then, sternly, he forced himself to work one full minute without speaking. A dozen agitated questions were clamoring for utterance, but he knew better than to give them voice. With a cheery casualness of manner, that made him inordinately proud of himself, he said: —

"Well, I certainly am glad you came now. I'm sure I don't know what I should have done, if you had n't. But, by the way, how did you happen to come to me?" Again he held his breath.

"Why, through Dr. Gleason. You knew that!"

"Yes, but I know only that. You never did — exactly this sort of work before, did you?"

"No — oh, no. But there has to be a beginning, you know; and mother says she thinks every girl ought to know how to do something, so that she can

support herself if it is necessary. And in our case I think — it is necessary."

Low as the last words were, the man's sensitively alert ear caught them.

"You mean —"

"I mean — I think mother is — is poor, and is trying to keep it from me." The words came with all the impetuosity of one who has found suddenly a sympathetic ear for a long-pent secret. "I can see it in so many ways — not keeping a maid, and being so — so anxious that I shall do well here. And — and she does n't seem natural, some way, lately. She's unhappy, or something. And she goes out so little — almost never, except in the evening."

"She does n't care to — to see people, perhaps." By a supreme effort Burke Denby hid the fever of excitement and rejoicing within him, and toned his voice to just the right shade of solicitous interest.

"No, she does n't," admitted Betty, with a long sigh. Then, impulsively, she added: "She seems so very afraid of meeting people that I've wondered sometimes if maybe she had old friends here and — and did n't want to meet them because — perhaps, her circumstances were changed now. That is n't like mother, but — Oh, I should n't say all this to you, Mr. Denby. I — I did n't think, really. I spoke before I thought. You seemed so — interested."

"I am interested, my dear — Miss Darling," returned the man, not quite steadily. "I — I think I should like to know — your mother."

"She's lovely."

"Are you — like her?" He had contrived to throw into his eyes a merry challenge — against her taking this as she might take it.

But Betty was too absorbed to be flippant, or even merrily self-conscious.

"Why, I don't know, but I don't think so — except my eyes. Every one says my eyes *are* like hers."

Burke Denby got suddenly to his feet and walked quite across the room. Apparently he was examining a rare old Venetian glass Tear Vase, especially prized by him for its associations. In reality he was trying to master the tumult within him. He had now not one remaining doubt. This stupendous thing was really so. She was his Elizabeth; his — Betty. Yet there remained still one more test. He must ask about her — father. And for this he must especially brace himself: he could imagine what Helen must have taught her — of him.

Very slowly, the vase still unconsciously clutched in his hand, Burke Denby walked back to the table and sat down.

"Well, as I said, I should like to see your mother," he smiled. "I feel that I know her already. But — your father; I don't think you have told me a thing about your father yet."

A rapt wistfulness came to the girl's face.

"Father! Oh, but I never stop talking when I get to telling of him. You see, I never knew him."

"No?"

Infinite longing and tenderness were coming into the man's eyes.

"But I know *about* him. Mother has told me, you see. So I know just how fine and noble and splendid he was, and —"

"*Fine — he — was?*" The words, as they fell from Burke Denby's dry lips were barely audible.

"Oh, yes. You see, all the way, ever since I could remember, daddy has been held up to me as so fine and splendid. Why, I learned to hold my fork — and my temper! — the way daddy would want me to. And there was n't a song or a sunset or a beautiful picture that I was n't told how daddy would have loved it. Mother was always talking of him, and telling me about him; so I feel that I know him, just as if he were alive."

"As — if — he — *were* — alive!" Burke Denby half started from his chair, his face a battle-ground for contending emotions.

"Yes. But he is n't, you see. He died many, many years ago."

There was the sudden tinkling of shattered glass on a polished floor.

"Oh, Mr. Denby!" exclaimed Betty in consternation. "Your beautiful vase!"

The man, however, did not even glance at the ruin at his feet. Still, he must have realized what he had done, thought Betty, for, as he crossed to his desk and sat down heavily, she heard him mutter: —

"To think I *could* have been — such a fool!"

CHAPTER XXV

ENIGMAS

Not until Burke Denby became convinced that Miss Elizabeth Darling was not his daughter did he realize how deeply the thought that she might be had taken hold of his very life — how closely entwined in his affections she had become. From the first minute the electrifying idea of her possible relationship had come to him, he had (in spite of his determination to the contrary) reveled in pictures of what his home would be with a daughter like that to love — and to love him. Helen, too, was in the pictures — true, a vague, shadowy Helen, yet a Helen idealized and glorified by the remorseful repentance born of a bunch of worn little diaries. Then to have the beautiful vision shattered by one word from the girl's own lips — and just when he had attained the pinnacle of joyous conviction that she was, indeed, his little girl of the long ago — it seemed as though he could not bear it.

And, most anguishing of all, there was no chance that there was a mistake. Even if the incongruity of her description of her father as applied to himself could be explained away, there was yet the insurmountable left. With his own ears he had heard her say that her father was dead — had been dead for many years. That settled it, of course. There could be no mistake about — death.

After the first stunning force of the disappointment, there came to Burke Denby the reaction — in the case of Burke Denby a characteristic reaction. It became evident, to some extent, the very next day. For the first time in weeks he did not work with his secretary over the cataloguing at all during the day. He dictated his letters, then left at once for his office at the Works. At luncheon he relapsed into his old stern silence; and in the afternoon, beyond giving a few crisp directions, he showed no interest in Betty's work, absenting himself most of the time from the room.

Yet not in the least was all this consciously planned on his part. He felt simply an aversion to being with this girl. Even the sight of her bright head bent over her work gave him a pang, the sound of her voice brought bitterness. Above all, he dreaded a glance from her eyes — Helen's eyes, that had lured him for a brief twenty-four hours into a fool's paradise of thinking they might, indeed, be — Helen's eyes.

Burke was grievously disappointed, ashamed, and angry; and being accustomed always to acting exactly as he felt, he acted now — as he felt. He was grievously disappointed that his brief dream of a daughter in his home should have come to naught. He was ashamed that he should have allowed himself to be deluded into such a dream, and angry that the thing had so stirred him — that he could be so stirred by the failure of so absurd and preposterous a supposition to materialize into fact.

As the days passed, matters became worse rather than better. Added to his disappointment and chagrin there came to be an unreasoning wrath that this girl was not his daughter, together with a rebellion at his lonely life, and an overmastering self-pity that he should be so abused of Fate. It was then that he began systematically to avoid, so far as was possible, being with the girl at all, save for the necessary dictation and instructions. This was the more easily accomplished, as the cataloguing now had almost arrived at the stage where it was a mere matter of copying and tabulating the mass of material already carefully numbered to correspond with the equally carefully numbered curios in the cabinets.

In spite of it all, however, Burke Denby knew, in his heart, that he was becoming more and more fond of this young girl, more and more interested in her welfare, more and more restless and dissatisfied when not in her presence, more and more poignantly longing to make her his daughter by adoption, now that it was settled beyond question that she was not his by the ties of flesh and blood. Outwardly, however, he remained the stern, unsmiling man, silent, morose, and anything but delightful as a daily companion.

To Betty he had become the unsolvable enigma. That this most unhappy change should have been brought about by the breaking of the Venetian Tear Vase, she could not believe — valuable and highly treasured as it was; yet, as she looked back, the

change seemed to have dated from the moment of the vase's shattering on the library floor, the day after Christmas.

At first she had supposed the man's sudden reversion to gloom and silence was a mere whim of the mind or a passing distemper of the body. But when day after day brought no light to his eye, no smile to his lip, no elasticity to his step, she became seriously disturbed, particularly as she could not help noticing that he no longer worked with her; that he no longer, in fact, seemed to want to remain in the library even to hear her read to him.

She was sorely troubled. Not only did she miss the pleasure and stimulus of his presence and interest in the work, but she feared lest in some way she had disappointed or offended him. She began to question herself and to examine critically her work.

She could find nothing. Her work had been well done. She knew that. There was absolutely no excuse for this sudden taciturn aloofness on his part. After all, it was probably nothing more than what might be expected of him — a going back to his usual self. Without doubt the strange thing was, not that he was stern and silent and morose now, but that, for a brief golden period, he had come out of his shell and acted like a human being. Doubtless it was under the sway of his interest in his curios, and his first delight at seeing them being brought into something like order, that he had, for a moment, as it were, stirred into something really human. And

his going back to his original sour unpleasantness now was merely a reversion to first principles.

That it should be so vexed Betty not a little.

And when they were having such a good time! Surely, for a man that *could* be so altogether charming and delightful to be habitually so extremely undesirable and disagreeable was most exasperating. And he had been such good company! How kind he had been, too, when she had told him so much of her own life and home! How interested he had shown himself to be in every little detail, just as if he really cared. And now —

With a tense biting of her lip Betty reproached herself bitterly for being so free to tell of her own small affairs. She ought to have known that any interest a man like that could show was bound to be superficial and insincere. What a pity she should lose, for once, her reserve! Well, at least she had learned her lesson. Never again would she be guilty of making a confidant of Mr. Burke Denby, no matter how suave and human-like he might elect to become for some other brief week in the future!

To her mother Betty said very little of all this. True, at the first, in her surprise at the remarkable change in her employer's attitude, she had told her mother of his reversion to gloom and sternness; but it had seemed to worry and disturb her mother so much that Betty had stopped at once. And always since then she had avoided speaking of his continued disagreeableness, and skillfully evaded answering per-

tinent questions. She told herself that she realized, of course, it was because her mother was so fearful that something would happen that this fine position, with the generous pay, should be lost. Dear mother — who thought she was hiding so shrewdly the fact of how poor they were!

There was something else that Betty did not tell her mother, also, and that was of her first peculiar and annoying experience with the woman at the newsstand at the station. It was about two weeks after Christmas that Betty had first seen the woman. Mr. Denby had asked her to go around by the station on her way home and purchase for him the December issue of "Research." He said it was not a very popular magazine, and that the woman was one of the few agents in town who kept it for sale. There was an article on Babylonian tablets in the December number, and he wished to see it.

The station was not very far from her home, and Betty was glad to do the errand, of course; but when she arrived at the newsstand she found a most offensive person who annoyed her with questions — a large woman with unpleasantly prominent eyes and a wart on her chin.

"Yes, Miss, I've got the magazine right here," she said with alacrity, in reply to Betty's request. "But, say, hain't I seen you before somewheres?"

Betty shook her head.

"I don't think so," she smiled. "At least, I do not remember seeing you anywhere."

"Well, don't you come here often, to the station, or somethin'?" persisted the woman.

"No, I have never been here before — except the day I arrived in town last September."

"H-m; funny!" frowned the woman musingly. "I'm a great case fur faces, an' I don't very often make a mistake. I could swear I'd seen you somewheres."

Betty smiled and shook her head again, as she turned away with her magazine.

Twice after that Mr. Denby had sent her to this same newsstand for a desired periodical; and on both occasions the woman had been cheerfully insistent in her questions, and in her reiterations that somewhere she certainly had seen her, as she never made mistakes in faces.

"An' yer workin' fur Burke Denby on the hill, ain't ye?" she asked at last.

Betty colored.

"I am working for Mr. Denby — yes."

"H-m; like him?"

"If you'll give me my change, please," requested Betty then, the flush deepening on her cheeks. "I am in some haste."

The woman laughed none too pleasantly.

"You don't want ter answer, an' I ain't sayin' I wonder," she chuckled. "He's a queer bug, an' no mistake, an' I don't wonder ye don't like him."

"On the contrary, I like him very much," flashed Betty, hurriedly catching up her magazine, and al-

most snatching the coins from the woman's hand, in her haste to be away.

Betty had not told her mother of these encounters. More and more plainly Betty was seeing how keenly averse to meeting people her mother was, and how evasive she was in her answers to the questions the market-men sometimes put to her. Instinctively Betty felt that these questions of the newsstand woman would distress her mother very much; so Betty kept them carefully to herself.

The conviction that her mother was fearful of meeting old friends in Dalton was growing on Betty these days, and it disturbed her greatly. Moreover she did not like a certain growing restless nervousness in her mother's manner, nor did she like the increasing pallor of her mother's cheek. Something, somewhere, was wrong. Of this Betty became more and more strongly convinced. Nor did a little episode that took place late in January tend to weaken this belief.

They had gone to market — Betty and her mother. Lured by an attractive "ad," they had gone farther from home than usual, and were in a store not often visited by them. They had given their order and turned to go, when suddenly Betty found herself whisked about by her mother's frantic clutch on her arm and led swiftly quite across the store to the opposite door. There, still impelled by that unyielding clutch on her arm, she found herself dodging in and out of the throngs of customers on their way

to the street outside. Even there their pace did not slacken until they were well around the corner of the block.

"Why, mother," panted Betty then, laughing, "I should think you were running away from all the plagues of Egypt."

"I — I was — worse than the plagues of Egypt," laughed her mother, a bit hysterically.

"Why, mother!" cried Betty, growing suddenly alert and anxious.

"There, there, dear, it was nothing. Never mind!" declared her mother. But even as she spoke she looked back fearfully over her shoulder.

"But, mother, what *was* it?"

"Nothing. Just a — a woman I did n't want to see. I used to know her years ago, and she was — such a talker! We would n't have got home to-night."

"But we shan't now — if we keep on this way," laughed Betty uneasily, her troubled eyes on her mother's face. "We're going in quite the opposite direction from home."

"Dear, dear, so we are! We must have turned the wrong way when we came out from the store."

"Yes, we — did," agreed Betty. Her words were light — but the troubled look had not left her eyes.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE ROAD TO UNDERSTANDING

It was on a gray morning early in February that Betty found her employer pacing the library from end to end like the proverbial caged lion. When he turned and spoke, she was startled at the look on his face — a worn, haggard look that told of sleeplessness — and of something else that she could not name.

He ignored her conventional morning greeting.

"Miss Darling, I want to speak to you."

"Yes, Mr. Denby."

"Will you come here to live — as my daughter?"

"Will I — what?" The amazement in Betty's face was obviously genuine.

"You are surprised, of course; and no wonder. I did n't exactly what you call 'break it gently,' did I? And I forgot that you have n't been thinking of this thing every minute for the last — er — month, as I have. Won't you sit down, please." With an abrupt gesture he motioned her to a chair, and dropped into one himself. "I can't, of course, beat about the bush now. I want you to come here to this house and be a daughter to me. Will you?"

"But, *Mr. Denby!*"

" 'This is so sudden!' Yes, I know," smiled the man grimly. "That's what your face says, and no

wonder. It may seem sudden to you — but it is not at all so to me. Believe me, I have given it a great deal of thought. I have debated it — longer than you can guess. And let me tell you at once that of course I want your mother to come, too. That will set your mind at rest on that point."

"But I — I don't think yet that I — I quite understand," faltered the girl.

"In what way?"

"I can't understand yet why — why you want me. You see, I — I have thought lately that — that you positively disliked me, Mr. Denby." Her chin came up with the little determined lift so like her mother.

With a jerk Burke Denby got to his feet and resumed his nervous stride up and down the room.

"My child," — he turned squarely about and faced her, — "I want you. I need you. This house has become nothing but a dreary old pile of horror to me. You, by some sweet necromancy of your own, have contrived to make the sun shine into its windows. It's the first time for years that there has been any sun — for me. But when you go, the sun goes. That's why I want you here all the time. Will you come? Of course, you understand I mean adoption — legally. But I don't want to dwell on that part. I want you to *want* to come. I want you to be happy here. Won't you come?"

Betty drew in her breath tremulously. For a long minute her gaze searched the man's face.

"Well, Miss Betty?" There was a confident smile in his eyes. He had the air of a man who has made a certain somewhat dreaded move, but who has no doubt as to the outcome.

"I'm afraid I — can't, Mr. Denby."

"You — *can't!*"

Betty, in spite of her very real and serious concern and anxiety, almost laughed at the absolute amazement on the man's face.

"No, Mr. Denby."

"May I ask why?" There was the chill of ice in his voice.

Again Betty felt the almost hysterical desire to laugh. Still her face was very grave.

"You — I — In the end you would not want me, Mr. Denby," she faltered, "because I — I should not be — happy here."

"May I ask why — *that?*"

There was no answer.

"Miss Darling, why would n't you be happy here?"

Genuine distress came into Betty's face.

"I would rather not say, Mr. Denby."

"But I prefer that you should."

"I can't. You would think me — impertinent."

"Not if I tell you to say it, Miss Betty. Why can't you be happy here? You know very well that you would have everything that money could buy."

"But what I want is something — money can't buy."

"What do you mean?"

No reply.

"Miss Darling, what do you mean?"

With a sudden fierce recklessness the girl turned and faced him.

"I mean *that* — just that — what you did now, and a minute ago. The way you have of — of expecting everybody and everything to bend to your will and wishes. Oh, I know, it's silly and horrible and everything for me to say this. But you *made* me do it. I told you it was impertinent! Don't you see? I'd have to have love and laughter and sympathy and interest and — and all that around me. I *could n't* be happy here. This house is like a tomb, and you — sometimes you are jolly and kind and — and *fine*. But I never know *how* you're going to be. And I'd die if I had to worry and fret and fear all the time how you *were* going to be! Mr. Denby, I — I could n't live in such a place, and mother could n't either. And I — Oh, what have I said? But you made me do it, you made me do it!"

For one long minute there was utter silence in the room. Burke Denby, at the library table, sat motionless, his hand shading his eyes. Betty, in her chair, wet her lips and swallowed convulsively. Her eyes were frightened — but her chin was high.

Suddenly he stirred. His hand no longer shaded his face. Betty, to her amazement, saw that his lips were smiling, though his eyes, she knew, were moist.

"Betty, my dear child, I thought before that I wanted you. I know now I've *got* to have you."

Betty, as if the smile were contagious, found her own lips twitching.

"What — do you mean?"

"I mean that your fearless little tirade was just what I needed, my dear. I *have* expected everything and everybody to bend to my will and wishes. I suspect that's what's been the matter, too, all the way up. I thought once, long ago, I'd learned my lesson. But it seems I have n't. Here I am up to the same old tricks again. Will you come and — er — train me, Betty? I will promise to be very docile."

Betty did laugh this time — and the tension snapped. "Train" — the very word with which she had shocked her mother weeks before!

"Seriously, my dear," — the man's face was very grave now, — "I want you to talk this thing over with your mother. I am a lonely old man — yes, old, in spite of the fact that I'm barely forty — I feel sixty! I want you, and I need you, and — notwithstanding your unflattering opinion of me, just expressed — I believe I can make you happy, and your mother, too. She shall have every comfort, and you shall have love and laughter and sympathy and interest, I promise you. Now, is n't your heart softening just a wee bit? *Won't* you come?"

"Why, of course, I — appreciate your kindness, Mr. Denby, and" — Betty drew a tremulous breath and looked wistfully into the man's pleading eyes — "it would be lovely for — mother, would n't it? She would n't have to worry any more, or — or —"

Burke Denby lifted an imperative hand. His face lighted. He sprang to his feet and spoke with boyish enthusiasm.

"The very thing! Miss Darling, I want you to go home and bring your mother back to luncheon with you. Never mind the work," he went on, as he saw her quick glance toward his desk. "I don't want to work. I could n't — this morning. And I don't want you to. I want to see your mother. I want to tell her — many things — of myself. I want her to see me, and see if she thinks she could give you to me as a daughter, and yet not lose you herself, but come here with you to live."

"But I — I could tell her this to-night," stammered Betty, knowing still that, in spite of herself, she was being swept quite off her feet by the extraordinary enthusiasm of the eager man before her.

"I don't want to wait till to-night. I want to see her now. Besides," — he cocked his head whimsically with the confident air of one who knows his point is gained, — "I want a magazine, and I forgot to ask you to get it for me last night. I want the February 'Research.' So we'll just let it go that I'm sending you to the station newsstand for that. Incidentally, you may come back around by your mother's place and bring her with you. There, now surely you won't object to — to running an errand for me!" he finished triumphantly.

"No, I surely can't object to — to running an errand for you," laughed Betty, as she rose to her

feet, a pretty color in her face. "And I — I'll try to bring mother."

It was in a tumult of excitement and indecision that Betty hurried down the long Denby walk that February morning. What would her mother say? How would she take it? Would she consent? Would she consent even to go to luncheon — she who so seldom went anywhere? It was a wonderful thing — this proposal of Mr. Denby's. It meant, of course, — everything, if they accepted it, a complete metamorphosis of their whole lives and future. It could not help meaning that. But would they be happy there? Could they be happy with a man like Mr. Denby? To be sure, he said he would be willing to be — trained. (Betty's face dimpled into a broad smile somewhat to the mystification of the man she chanced to be meeting at the moment.) But would he be really kind and lovable like this all the time? He had been delightful once before — for a few days. What guaranty had they that he would not again, at the first provocation, fall back into his old glum unbearableness?

But what would her mother say? Well, she would soon know. She would get the magazine, then hurry home — and find out.

It was between trains at the station, and the waiting-room was deserted. Betty hurriedly told the newsstand woman what she wanted, and tried to assume a forbidding aspect that would discourage questions. But the woman made no move to get the

magazine. She did not seem even to have heard the request. Instead she leaned over the counter and caught Betty's arm in a vise-like grip. Her face was alight with joyous excitement.

"Well, I am glad to see you! I've been watchin' ev'ry day fur you. What did I tell ye? *Now* I guess you'll say I know when I've seen a face before! *Now* I know who you are. I see you with your mother at Martin's grocery last Sat'day night, and I tried ter get to ye, but I lost ye in the crowd. I see *you* first, then I see her, and I knew then in a minute who you was, and why I'd thought I'd seen ye somewheres. I had n't — not since you was a kid, though; but I knew yer mother, an' you've got her eyes. You're Helen Denby's daughter. My, but I'm glad ter see ye!"

Betty, plainly distressed, had been attempting to pull her arm away from the woman's grasp; but at the name a look of relief crossed her face.

"You are quite mistaken, madam," she said coldly. "My mother's name is not Helen Denby."

"But I see her myself with my own eyes, child! Of course she's older lookin', but I'd swear on my dyin' bed 't was her. Ain't you Dorothy Elizabeth?"

Betty's eyes flew wide open.

"You — know — my — *name?*"

"There! I knew 't was," triumphed the woman. "An' ter think of you comin' back an' workin' fur yer father like this, an' —"

"My — *what?*"

It was the woman's turn to open wide eyes of amazement.

"Do you mean to say you don't know Burke Denby is your father?"

"But he is n't my father! My father is dead!"

"Who said so?"

"Why, mother — that is — I mean — she never said — What do you mean? He can't be my father. My mother's name is Helen Darling!" Betty was making no effort to get away now. She was, indeed, clutching the woman's arm with her free hand.

The woman scowled and stared. Suddenly her face cleared.

"My Jiminy! so that's her game! She's keepin' it from ye, I bet ye," she cried excitedly.

"Keeping it from me! Keeping what from me? What are you talking about?" Betty's face had paled. The vague questions and half-formed fears regarding her mother's actions for the past few months seemed suddenly to be taking horrible shape and definiteness.

"Sakes alive! Do you mean ter say that you don't know that Burke Denby is your father, an' that he give your mother the go-by when you was a kid, an' she lit out with you an' hain't been heard of since?"

"No, no, it can't be — it can't be! My father was good and fine, and —"

"Rats! Did she stuff ye ter that, too? I tell ye *'t is* so. Say, look a-here! Wa'n't you down ter Martin's grocery last Sat'day night at nine o'clock?"

"Y-yes."

"Well, wa'n't you there with yer mother?"

"Y-yes." A power entirely outside of herself seemed to force the answers from Betty's lips.

"Well, I see ye. You was tergether, talkin' to the big fat man with the red nose. I started towards ye, but I lost ye in the crowd."

Betty's face had grown gray-white. She remembered now. That was the night her mother had run away from — something.

"But I knew her," nodded the woman. "I knew she was Helen Denby."

"But maybe you were — mistaken."

"Mistaken? Me? Not much! I don't furgit faces. You ask yer mother if she don't remember Mis' Cobb. Did n't I live right on the same floor with her fur months? Hain't yer mother ever told ye she lived here long ago?"

Betty nodded dumbly, miserably.

"Well, I lived next to her, and I knew the whole thing — how she got the letter tellin' her ter go, an' the money Burke Denby sent her —"

"Letter! Money! You mean he wrote her to — go — away? He *paid* her?" The girl had become suddenly galvanized into blazing anger.

"Sure! That's what I'm tellin' ye. An' yer mother went. I tried ter stop her. I told her ter go straight up ter them Denbys an' demand her rights — an' *your* rights. But she would n't. She had n't a mite o' spunk. Just because he was ashamed of her she —"

"Ashamed of her! *Ashamed* of my mother!" — if but Helen Denby could have seen the flash in Betty's eyes!

"Sure! She wa'n't so tony, an' her folks wa'n't grand like his, ye know. That's why old Denby objected ter the marriage in the first place. But, say, did n't you know any of this I'm tellin' ye? Jiminy! but it does seem queer ter be tellin' ye yer own family secrets like this — an' you here workin' in his very home, an' not knowin' it, too. If that ain't the limit — like a regular story-book! Now, I ain't never one ter butt in where 't ain't none of my affairs, but I've got ter say this. You're a Denby, an' ought ter have some spunk; an' if I was you I'd brace right up an' — Here, don't ye want yer magazine? What are ye goin' ter do?"

But the girl was already halfway across the waiting-room.

If Betty's thoughts and emotions had been in a tumult on the way to the station, they were in a veritable chaos on the return trip. She did not go home. She turned her steps toward the Denby Mansion; and because she knew she could not possibly sit still, she walked all the way.

So this was the meaning of it — the black veil daytimes, the walks only at night, the nervous restlessness, the unhappiness. Her mother *had* had something to conceal, something to fear. Poor mother — dear mother — how she must have suffered!

But why, *why* had she come back here and put

her into that man's home? And why had she told her always how fine and noble and splendid her father was. Fine! Noble! Splendid, indeed! Still, it was like mother, — dear mother, — always so sweet and gentle, always seeing the good in everything and everybody! But why had she put her there — in that man's house? How could she have done it?

And Burke Denby himself — did he know? Did he suspect that she was his daughter? Adopt her, indeed! Was *that* the way he thought he could pay her mother back for all those years? And the grief and the hurt and the mortification — where did they come in? Ashamed of her! *Ashamed of her, indeed!* Why, her little finger was as much finer and nobler and — But just wait till she saw him, that was all!

Like the overwrought, half-beside-herself young hurricane of wrathfulness that she was, Betty burst into the library at Denby House a few minutes later.

The very sight of her face brought the man to his feet.

"Why, Betty, what's the matter? Where's your mother? Could n't she come? What *is* the matter?"

"Come? No, she did n't come. She'll never come — never!"

Before the blazing wrath in the young eyes the man fell back limply.

"Why, Betty, did n't you tell her —"

"I've told her nothing. I have n't seen her," cut in the girl crisply. "But I've seen somebody else. I know now — everything!"

From sheer stupefaction the man laughed.

"Are n't we getting a little — theatrical, my child?" he murmured mildly.

"You need n't call me that. I refuse to recognize the relationship," she flamed. "Perhaps we are getting theatrical — that woman said it was like a story-book. And perhaps you thought you could wipe it all out by adopting me. Adopting me, indeed! As if I'd let you! I can tell you it is n't going to *end* like a story-book, with father and mother and daughter — 'and they all lived happily ever after' — because I won't let it!"

"What do you mean by that?" The man's face had grown suddenly very white.

Betty fixed searching, accusing eyes on his countenance.

"Are you trying to make me think you don't know I'm your daughter; that —"

"Betty! Are you really, really — my little Betty?"

At the joyous cry and the eagerly outstretched arms Betty shrank back.

"Then you *did n't* know — that?"

"No, no! Oh, Betty, Betty, is it true? Then it'll all be right now. Oh, Betty, I'm so glad," he choked. "My little girl! Won't you — come to me?"

She shook her head and retreated still farther out of his reach. Her eyes still blazed angrily.

"Betty, dear, hear me! I don't know — I don't understand. It's all too wonderful — to have it come — *now*. Once, for a little minute, the wild

thought came to me that you might be. But, Betty, you yourself told me your father was — dead!"

"And so he is — to me," sobbed Betty. "You are n't my father. My father was good and true and noble and — you —"

"And your mother *told* you that?" breathed the man, brokenly. "Betty, I — I— Where is she? Is she there — at home — now? I want to — see her!"

"I shan't let you see her." Betty had blazed again into unreasoning wrath. "You don't deserve it. You told her you were ashamed of her. *Ashamed of her!* And she's the best and the loveliest and dearest mother in the world! She's as much above and beyond anything you — you — *Why* she let me come to you I don't know. I can't think why she did it. But now I — I —"

"Betty, if you'll only let me explain —"

But the great hall door had banged shut. Betty had gone.

Betty took a car to her own home. She was too weak and spent to walk.

It was a very white, shaken Betty that climbed the stairs to the little apartment a short time later.

"Why, Betty, darling!" exclaimed her mother, hurrying forward. "You are ill! Are you ill?"

With utter weariness Betty dropped into a chair.

"Mother, why did n't you tell me?" she asked dully, heartbrokenly. "Why did you let me come here and go to that house day after day and not know — anything?"

"Why, what — what do you mean?" All the color had drained from Helen Denby's face.

"Did you ever know a Mrs. Cobb?"

"That woman! Betty, she has n't — has she been — talking — to you?"

Betty nodded wearily.

"Yes, she's been talking to me, and— Oh, mother, mother, *why* did you come here — *now?*" cried Betty, springing to her feet in sudden frenzy again. "How could you let me go there? And only to-day — this morning, he told me he wanted to adopt me! And you — he was going to have us both there — to live. He said he was so lonely, and that I — I made the sun shine for the first time for years. And afterwards, when I found out *who* he was, I thought he meant it as a salve to heal all the unhappiness he'd caused you. I thought he was trying to *pay;* and I told him —"

"You *told* him! You mean you've seen him since — Mrs. Cobb?"

"Yes. I went back. I told him —"

"Oh, Betty, Betty, what are you saying?" moaned her mother. "What have you done? You did n't tell him *that* way!"

"Indeed I did! I told him I knew — everything now; and that he need n't think he could wipe it out. And he wanted to see you, and I said he could n't. I —"

An electric bell pealed sharply through the tiny apartment.

"Mother, that's he! I know it's he! Mother, don't let him in," implored Betty. But her mother already was in the hall.

Betty, frightened, despairing, and angry, turned her back and walked to the window. She heard the man's quick cry and the woman's sobbing answer. She heard the broken, incoherent sentences with which the man and the woman attempted to crowd into one brief delirious minute all the long years of heartache and absence. She heard the pleading, the heart-hunger, the final rapturous bliss that vibrated through every tone and word. But she did not turn. She did not turn even when some minutes later her father's voice, low, unsteady, but infinitely tender, reached her ears.

"Betty, your mother has forgiven me. Can't — you?"

There was no answer.

"Betty, dear, he means — we've forgiven each other, and — if *I* am happy, can't you be?" begged Betty's mother, tremulously.

Still no answer.

"Betty," began the woman again pleadingly.

But the man interposed, a little sadly: —

"Don't urge her, Helen. After all, I deserve everything she can say, or do."

"But she does n't understand," faltered Helen.

The man shook his head. A wistful smile was on his lips.

"No, she does n't — understand," he said. "It's

a long road to — understanding, dear. You and I have found it so."

"Yes, I know." Helen's voice was very low.

"And there are sticks and stones and numberless twigs to trip one's feet," went on the man softly. "And there are valleys of despair and mountains of doubt to be encountered — and Betty has come only a little bit of the way. Betty is young."

"But" — it was Helen's tremulous voice — "it's on the mountain-tops that — that we ought to be able to see the end of the journey, you know."

"Yes; but there are all those guideboards, remember," said the man, "and Betty has n't come to the guideboards yet — regret — remorse — forgiveness — patience, and — atonement."

There was a sudden movement at the window. Then Betty, misty-eyed, stood before them.

"I know I am — on the mountain of doubt now, but" — she paused, her gaze going from one to the other of the wondrously glorified faces before her — "I'll try so hard to see — the end of the journey," she faltered.

"Betty!" sobbed two adoring voices, as loving arms enfolded her.

THE END

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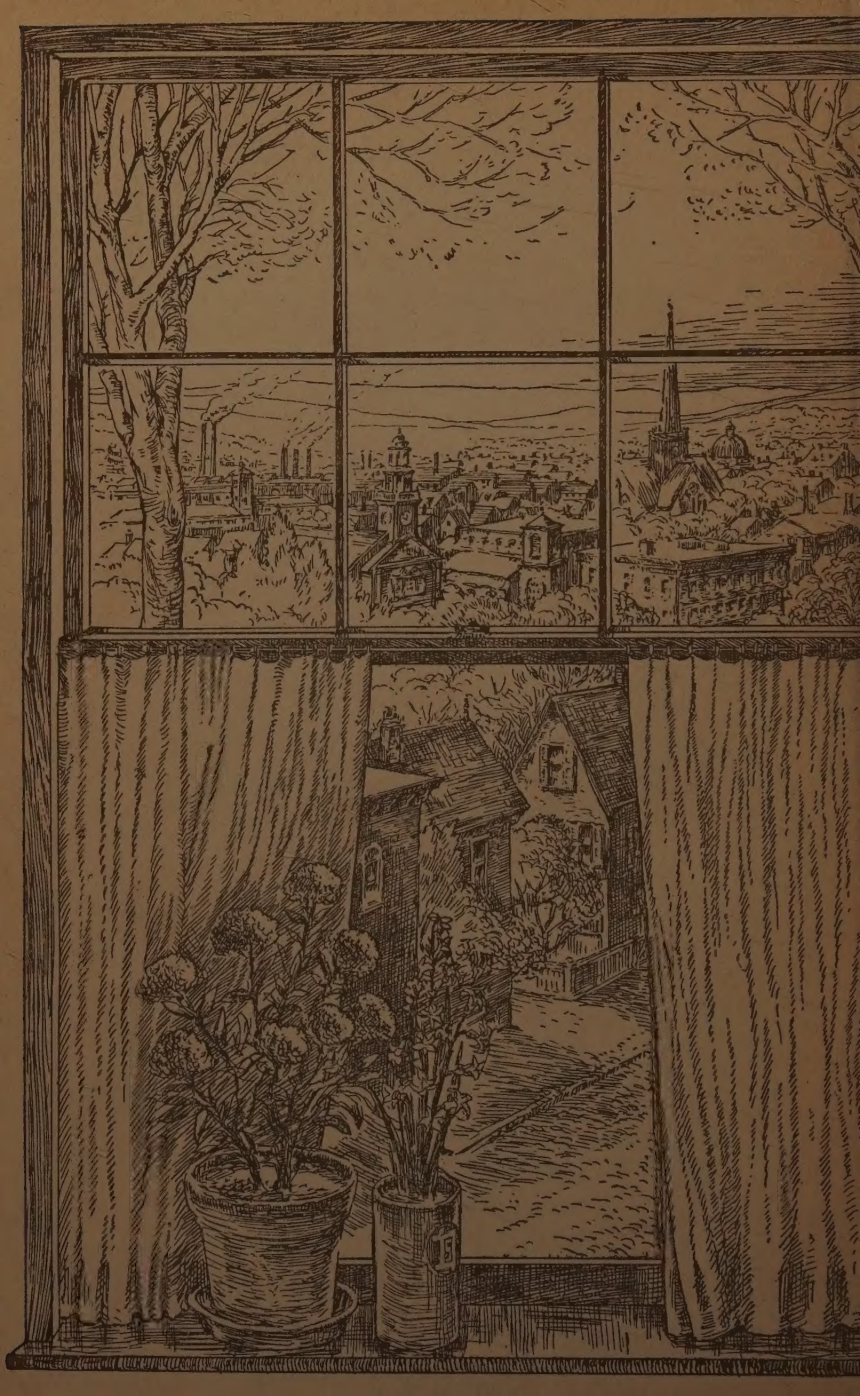

Lewis · E · Smith 1914